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KNIGHT RIDER IV: THE 24-CARAT ASSASSIN

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# KNIGHT RIDER IV: THE 24-CARAT ASSASSIN

The grumble of truck engines approached from the south. Michael reversed his position in the ditch and hunkered down. At least one sentry would be walking along on foot, preceding the whole caravan.

‘Now, KITT!’

Up on the crest of the rise, KITT peeled out and instantly got everyone’s attention. Guards, shouting, dropped from the trucks and vans and ran ahead, unslinging machine-guns. They sprayed KITT with slugs as the car bounced through the junction, going fast, but not too fast, to give them a good show.

The diversion gave Michael just enough time to worm around behind the caravan and lift himself noiselessly over the tailgate of the largest truck . . .

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# KNIGHT RIDER IV: THE 24-CARAT ASSASSIN

A novel by Glen A. Larson and Roger Hill

Based on the Universal Television Series

'Knight Rider'

Created by Glen A. Larson

Adapted from the episode

'All That Glitters' Written by Robert Foster and Robert W. Gilmer

A TARGET BOOK

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the Paperback Division of

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# Legal

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# Dedication

For Dr Jerry Cornel

*Hard-boiled brain gumshoe  
and toastmaster of renown*

# Chapter 1

The flat-bladed throwing knife hissed meanly through the air and stuck with a *thunk* into the oaken mast a neat two inches from Tiara's left ear. It nailed a few strands of her hair to the wood. She flinched but did not cry out; to cry out would make things scarier.

Tiara D'Arcy was normally a cool, attractive woman. Her mingled bloodlines – the honourable Oshisu line from Tokyo melded with the hot renegade element of a Russian mother – gave her wide, bright-green, compelling eyes and a singularly even, olive cast of complexion. She had nearly a yard of straight black, glossy hair. She could turn heads in any crowd – and indeed, the fifteen or so onlookers present were concentrating solely on her. But the bright-green eyes were irised wide with fear, primally afraid. The smooth, satiny skin of her face seemed drained of colour, and had produced tiny, jewel-like beads of panic sweat. And her fine black hair was now stuck to the yacht's mast by an ugly weapon that reminded her of a shark's tooth, made out of stainless steel.

*Thunk!* Another of the nasty things lodged itself into the cabin exterior's wall an equal distance from her opposite ear. Her green Oriental eyes lost their hooded, sensual aspect, and now silently begged for her release.

She stared at the golden man.

He stood perhaps eleven feet away from her on the hand-caulked teak deck of the yacht. His suit was dark navy blue, vested. The vest and suit featured gold buttons. The costly fob dangling from the watch chain attached across the vest pockets was gold, bright and glittering. Metallic gold thread highlighted the pleated seam of his trousers, the open-throated shirt was also metallic gold, like a shining iguana skin. It was ostentatiously, loudly gold, like something a game-show host might wear. A gold chain hung in rectangular links around his thick-muscled bull neck. His dark-brown complexion was tanned to a burnished bronze colour, as close to that of gold as workouts and sunlamps could make it. The peculiar glowing tone of his flesh was due, Tiara knew, to a genetic happenstance. Like her, the golden man was a half-breed. He had inherited from his Mexican father the ethnic trait of dark, mellow skin, but it was conditioned by strong Irish blood from his mother. It was easy to

imagine his skin as flexible gold. The Irish genes had also lent amber flecks to his deep-brown, coffee-coloured eyes. Tiara thought of *Goldwasser*, the expensive liqueur that was bottled with actual flakes of gold floating around amid its thick, clear liquid. That was what Eduardo O'Brien's eyes were like, only substituting a sinister, intense brown for an emotionless lack of colour.

He stood before her, a black bandolero of soft leather slung over one shoulder. It held a complement of the flat Swedish throwing knives. O'Brien had all his knives specially manufactured at enormous expense. He loved his knives. He smiled at her but the smile was a dead, manufactured thing; she could see his thoughts in his eyes, which were bright with challenge.

He plucked another knife from one of the bandolero's ammunition-like pockets and hurled it at her face . . . with his eyes closed.

Tiara yelped.

The knife stuck and vibrated in the wall half an inch above the parting in her hair. Scattered applause broke out among the onlookers.

Eduardo O'Brien removed the remaining three knives from the bandolero and held them in a fist, separated by his fingers. Tiara knew that he had calluses on the insides of each finger from his ceaseless regimen of practice. As far as she knew, Eduardo O'Brien had never cut himself with a knife. Her stomach muscles constricted, willing her body to flee, because she realised what O'Brien was preparing to do.

His right hand blurred, pitching the knives into the air, one-two-three. All three were gone from his fist in two seconds flat.

Her eyes slammed shut. *Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!*

The first pinned her evening gown to the bulkhead, tingling her left armpit. The second caressed the hollow of her lovely throat. And the third pinned the gown between her legs. She felt absurdly crucified . . . but she was unharmed.

More applause. O'Brien opened his eyes and bowed.

Tiara reached down and jerked the third knife free. With a snap of her shoulder she tore the gown loose at the shoulder, exposing a bare arm the same even colour as her face. She did not care about the gown; it only cost a thousand dollars or so. Moving quickly to the buffet table near the starboard rail, she snatched up a glass of Crystal champagne, downed it, and lifted another. She turned with the knife in her hand. After making sure Eduardo was watching her, she tossed it into the sea quite pointedly. It pleased her to watch the self-



satisfied smile drop from his face just as quickly.

He hurried over. She clutched her champagne glass like a talisman against evil.

He smiled his serpent's smile and took her free hand. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said with just a trace of accent, 'I present the lovely – and brave – Miss Tiara D'Arcy.' The people on deck applauded politely, and they bowed together. Only Tiara was aware of the bone-crushing pain in her hand. He smiled, torturing her secretly. She smiled, to deny him the pleasure of hurting her openly. Eduardo O'Brien could cause great pain . . . but he could also invoke great pleasure. Tiara was attracted by danger, and enticed even more by money. That was enough reason, to her, for being O'Brien's showpiece, and allowing the occasional rough use he made of her.

'I am going to my cabin,' she said evenly.

'Our cabin,' he corrected under his breath. 'I shall be there directly. I must take care of some business first.' Orders given, punishment meted out, he let her go . . . with other orders implied for later on.

She turned and stomped off haughtily on spiked heels, hips twitching back and forth, the shreds of the gown sleeve billowing behind her, unveiling more flawless skin. Many male eyes watched her exit until she disappeared through a hatchway leading to the cabins.

O'Brien shrugged and turned back to his audience. A slender white-haired man in a business suit approached. He, like O'Brien, wore gold, but only a watch and a pinky ring. He knew that Eduardo did not like to be made fun of. He balanced a drink in one hand, and they spoke without looking directly at each other. They watched the partygoers, milling about.

'We just got the word. The shipment is on. Tonight.' He sipped his martini.

O'Brien let irritation flicker across his dark face. 'Standard procedure. No *problema*, Elton. Make the necessary arrangements. Use the phone with the scrambler unit. O'Brien trusted Elton Matthews, his American business partner, more than any other single operative, but sometimes Matthews' jumpiness and relentless devotion to minutia annoyed him. That was why Matthews was such a good partner – he acted as overseer on technical trivia that O'Brien hated wasting time on. Matthews' paranoia kept them both secure; his calculator-like mind kept track of all the figures and kept everyone involved honest. There was no room for thieves' honour in their occupation.

A stunning blonde wearing an outfit that was mostly thigh and cleavage exposure closed in on O'Brien. She was holding one of the throwing knives, plucked from the wall where Tiara had stood moments before.

'If I throw your knife overboard, will you come to my cabin later, too?' she said.

O'Brien's eyes appreciated her, and he smiled. Even his teeth were faintly rimmed with real gold.

Close call, thought the man in black.

He clung like a lizard to the side of the yacht, his textured rubber gloves locked around the starboard anchor rope. He was completely encased in a form-fitting scuba suit, dead black, with a hood. He was very close to the rail; close enough to look up Tiara's dress when she chucked the throwing knife overboard. The somersaulting blade had missed pegging his head by about a foot before hitting the ocean surface with a meek little splash. If anyone had cared to peek over the rail and follow its descent, they would have seen the man in black hanging there like a spider in a spotlight.

Fortunately, no faces appeared at the rail.

The man in black swung on the anchor rope and wedged his foot into a service porthole. Acrobatically, he continued the swing, working his way back up to the deck rail. He peered over a casual observer would never have noticed the black hood against the dark background of the sea-and checked the corridor leading to the cabin cluster. It was devoid of life. He had noticed guards earlier, brawny dudes toting Uzi submachineguns. He would have to be extremely careful.

In a single gymnastic motion, he flung himself over the rail and landed without a noise on the deck. One jump and he was inside the interior hallway, out of sight.

He had overheard the conversation between Eduardo O'Brien and Elton Matthews. Matthews had passed down this same hallway only seconds before.

The man in black padded quickly past the closed doors until he heard Matthews' voice within one of the cabins. Silently, efficiently, he located the adjacent cabin, slipped the door lock with a flat metal tool retrieved from a pocket of the scuba-commando suit, and ducked into the empty room.

'... in Calexico. Say again? Oh, the number.' Matthews' voice was muffled, but the man in black could hear it clearly enough through a door that connected the two cabins. He pressed his ear to the thin masonite surface of the door.

'555-4225. Now listen carefully-'

The man in black froze like a cat at the sound of footsteps in the hallway. The locked knob of the cabin door rattled. It seemed like a cabin check. The footsteps passed on.

‘Hold on a minute, Elmo,’ said Matthews.

‘Spot security checkup,’ said the guard to Matthews. ‘Mr O’Brien’s strict instructions.’

‘This cabin’s secure.’ A pause, then with annoyance Matthews added, ‘I’m on long distance here.’

The door closed and the guard continued on down the hallway.

The man in black was not sure if O’Brien suspected his trespassing, nor did he wish to loiter around until his presence could be verified. In the next room, Matthews continued: ‘Elmo, do you think it matters to Eduardo what bloody time it is where you are? Just get your butt out to *Boca Culebra* by dawn and make the damned delivery. I guarantee the envelope will be in the pay drop by dawn, so you and your men have nothing to sweat. Right. I’ll see you soon. Right. Goodbye.’

With a sigh of impatience Matthews racked the receiver and left the cabin. The man in black extracted his door-slipping tool and moved, wraith-like, into the next room.

The desk lamp was still on; Matthews’ chair still warm. Light-cubes for various telephone extensions blinked on the phone console. Quickly, with a pre-planned sense of destination that said he was familiar with the layout of the office cabin, the man in black dropped to his hands and knees beneath the desk and peeled back a swatch of carpeting to reveal the round metal face of a floor-mounted safe.

He stripped back his rubber cuff and extracted a slip of paper bearing the numbers of a combination: 2/45, 1/40, 1/32, 2/40. The large numbers were the digits on the dial face; the small ones the number of turns needed. If the combination was botched, the safe would open, but the man in black would be looking into an exploding tear gas bomb while the safe’s contents incinerated themselves. Eduardo O’Brien was very security-conscious.

His fingers played the dial. He held a breath and cranked the safe latch hard to the right.

Nothing. It didn’t budge. He had the wrong combination.

There were more footsteps in the hall.

He did not pause to ponder what had gone wrong. Now escape was the imperative, and his trained physique implemented it instantaneously.

The man in black slipped to the door and watched the shadows the guard’s booted feet cast across the crack of light at the bottom of the jamb. He mentally assessed the length of the hallway with the man’s stride and waited several beats before opening the cabin door.

Nobody in the hallway; so far luck was with him. He moved out, in the same direction as the guard. If they caught up with each other, the guard’s back would be to him. If he went

back the way he had come, the unexpected waited for him. He stuck to the guard's tail.

Twenty seconds later he was looking at the port rail of the ship. The guard, his ugly Uzi machinegun held at port arms, turned right and continued checking cabins.

The man in black crouched and looked around the corner. If the guard suspected an interloper, he would also expect to see his head at head level. The man in black laid his cheek against the floor when he looked.

He waited for the guard to turn his back, then he sprang over the rail, like an Olympic contestant finishing a routine on the parallel bars. He rolled up, over, and out of sight with the stealth of a Ninja warrior.

He performed perfectly – but the lock slipping tool in his unzipped pocket did not. It fell out and clattered on the deck. The guard halted, turned around, and retraced his steps.

The man in black was fairly certain the plate held no fingerprints. Rather than gamble on retrieving it, and being seen, he dropped into the surf before the guard could spot his black-gloved hand clinging to the rail. He was briefly fearful of the guard hearing him hit the water, and on the way down folded his body into the optimum position for penetration – toes pointed, hands tucked into his groin, head down. He sliced into the water with a *shushsing* noise, like a blown drape brushing against a sofa.

His weapon in one hand, the sentry bent to lift the featureless metal plate. His eyebrows went up. He looked toward the upper deck, to see if the curio had broken or fallen from something up there. Then he shrugged and tucked the plate into his zippered shirt pocket.

The man in black was already long gone.

Elmo Elliot hung up the phone calmly, then picked up the dead receiver and slammed it savagely down.

'Damned Matthews!' he growled. 'Who the hell does he think he is? Orders, orders, always orders!' He stared down the phone with contempt, thinking that if he was going to kowtow to dummies like Matthews and Eduardo O'Brien – who obviously did not impress him much – then he damned well better be paid on time. The last time he'd made a run for the two partners, the pay envelope in the mail drop had been twenty-four hours late, and he was edgy tonight. If his money was late this time, he'd drive O'Brien's bloody trucks off a cliff. 'Friggin' dummies,' he muttered.

He climbed into a heavy down jacket, making sure his phoney Border Patrol badge was in place on his phoney dark-green Border Patrol blouse. The .357 Magnum strapped to his hip

was loaded with heavy-grain cartridges designed to pancake when striking the target – his firepower was strong enough to blow a side of beef into steaks at fifty yards.

Elliot zippered the jacket over his get-up, locked up his apartment, and went down a flight of wooden steps to where his truck was parked.

Fifteen seconds after he drove away, a pair of headlights winked on behind the apartment building, and a maroon rental jeep tailed Elliot all the way down to the Arizona-Mexico border.

Arthur Abrahms hated the desert.

He was a creature of urban habit. For him, normal nighttime involved the sleeping noises of the city, not the unusual shrieks and chirpings of the wilderness. At night he expected to hear the far-off cries of police sirens or the predawn growl of garbage trucks, and see by the dim glow of mercury-vapour streetlamps. Out here, in the middle of nowhere, the far-off cries sounded like coyotes howling. The growling noises were God only knew what. And the light came from a billion stars, stars never visible to the city dweller, so bright and numerous that they looked fake, like a movie special effect, not reality. Arthur's reality was the city, and the legal profession.

It was the legal profession that had brought him skulking out to the Arizona-Mexico border, in the middle of the Sonoran Desert, in the dead of night. His rented four-wheel drive Bronco crunched along the rutted dirt road, lights off, navigating by the unnaturally bright light of the stars. He did not wish to be spotted by the quarry he was tailing-the truck about half a mile ahead of him. Its yellow running lights bobbed up and down as it negotiated the bumpy, hilly road, more properly a goatpath. Then they dipped down a final time and vanished.

It didn't matter. Arthur was near his own preselected observation point. A piece of worm-ridden desert wood jutted from the scrub bushes on the right side of the path. A rusty beer can was tied by wire to the top of the stick; it rocked about in the light breeze. Arthur turned hard right when he passed the marker he had set.

The only natural sound, to Arthur, was the sound of the Bronco's engine clicking and cooling off. He grabbed his camera and pocket tape recorder and picked his way through the ocotilla plants to the crest of the ridge.

Below him was a tiny campfire. He was quite close to the barbed-wire lined ditch that denoted the border between the two countries – it was out there in the blackness, somewhere

beyond the campfire. No illegals in their right mind would burn a fire so close to the crossing point . . . so it was either a decoy, or some entirely different operation. He socketed the viewfinder of the Hirata Phase Three camera to his eye, and the landscape sprang into resolution around him. The Hirata was equipped with a modified Nitefinder scope unit and infrared film. The film cost sixty-five bucks per roll to develop.. Arthur scanned up . . . down . . . the fire was on the Mexican side of the border, after all.

To look at the fire through the scope hurt his eyes. Just as he thought that, someone below extinguished it. People scurried. Through the scope he could now make out three vehicles—two vans and a deuce-and-a-half. The running men clambered aboard and the engines roared to life. Arthur was already snapping photo after photo, the whirl of the camera's speed-winder another reassuring sound of civilization.

'Two-thirty am, Friday,' he said into the pinhole microphone wired through buttonhole on his coat collar. The recorder in his pocket was cranking away. 'Report number four. Same vehicles, different breach point – this is the third crossing in a week. There are several Coyotes on the truck, some soldiers... and about a dozen illegals.'

Now, through the camera, he could make out where the fence had been breached. He had snapped off half his roll. The trucks lumbered through the passages like unwieldy dinosaurs.

'I'm moving down.' It was his habit to make a record of every move. It would be important, later, in court. He edged along the rise, snapping random shots to establish his orientation in relation to the moving trucks. 'The sentries are no longer hanging off the sides of the truck. They're probably riding inside now . . .'

Arthur's blood was racing with the sensation of the hunt. He had accumulated enough data in the past week to . . .

He stopped upon hearing a noise behind him. There were several beats of silence. To hell with it, he thought – just another of those crazy desert sounds. Maybe a diamond back rattler scrounging around for a meal. *That* idea gave him a queasy little shiver. He hated snakes. He wanted to get back to the sounds of the city. All three vehicles were across now. 'They've completed the passage,' he said. 'Now in the US.'

*The guards weren't on the truck now!* Suddenly Arthur realised what had happened.

He turned to beat a hasty path back to the Bronco, and the cold, round muzzle of a machinegun seated itself firmly in the hollow of his neck.

Sarcastically, a heavily-accented voice said, 'Welcome to the United States, señor.'

Arthur felt the gun barrel nudge upward as the trigger was pulled.

The last thing he heard, as the burst of slugs blew his head off, was the nasty, spattering racket of machinegun fire, a very civilised noise indeed.

Elmo Elliot watched the decapitated corpse of Arthur Abrahms flop backwards into a bushy tangle of tumbleweeds through his own Nitefinder binoculars. So much for the lawyer, he thought.

He monitored the guard a moment longer, to make sure he collected the camera and tape recorder the lawyer had undoubtedly been carrying, and then dropped the binocs from his eyes to light a congratulatory cigarette for himself.

‘So far so good,’ he said, then went down to join the others.

## Chapter 2

A whirling, midday dust devil crossed the desert highway, bisecting the path of the sleek black automobile cruising along at a steady ninety-five miles per hour. It blew south while the car blew west.

Outwardly just another bad black sports car, the vehicle gave no outward indication that it was, in fact, the Knight Industries Two Thousand – KITT, in the shorthand of the technicians that had created the wonder car. The driver was just as unique. Michael Knight had been ‘created’ from a former identity, created with the resources of the Wilton Knight financial empire, given new flesh with surgery, new records through computer systems, and a new goal in life through the elder Knight’s legacy. Wilton Knight was dead, but his FLAG programme – the acronym was shortform for Foundation for Law and Government – was very much alive under the administration of Wilton’s aide, Devon Miles. Michael worked for FLAG; had stayed on after Wilton Knight’s death as a kind of freelance troubleshooter, Lone Ranger-ing his way into various types of peculiar assignments at Devon Miles’ direction. The assignments provided far more action than Michael’s previous calling, which was a lieutenant of police in Reno, Nevada. His life as a cop had ended in a shoot-out at an abandoned Nevada desert rest area; from those ashes ‘Michael Knight’ had risen, phoenix-like. FLAG provided him with KITT, and KITT provided informational access beyond human belief-via his linkups to FLAG’s computer resources – while FLAG supplied the cash and the missions. Michael was a maverick, a free agent, much to Devon Miles’ frequent disdain. Life as the Lone Ranger wasn’t so bad, he mused. Not when you got unlimited funds, a car-cum-computer centre and battle-tank like KITT, and a free hand – within limits – to act according to your own will.

And here he was, in the desert once again.

Michael glanced at the sunbaked horizon to his left. ‘That’s Mexico, across the border, KITT. Absolute dynamite, wouldn’t you agree?’

The red display panel of KITT’s microprocessor vox-box, mounted just above the steering column on the high-tech dashboard, blinked in response, its gradated grid pattern



jumping with crimson light. *'I think it looks exactly like the desert in California.'*

He snorted. *'Some worldly-wise traveller and bon vivant you'd make.'*

*'Michael, I truly cannot understand the human concept of separation by border, and ethnic compartmentalisation by nationality. You are all of the same species; you can all interbreed, therefore you are all the same. You are all people. Don't such artificial distinctions unnecessarily confuse the issue?'*

*'I think you've tapped into the idea of prejudice, old buddy. But there's a positive side to that kind of categorisation: we get a wealth of different languages, cultures, customs – '*

*'Which seem only to hamper communication and foment misunderstanding,'* responded the machine. *'Computers and microprocessors utilise numerical commons – it's much more efficient. I can speak to a German computer, or a Russian computer, and be instantly understood. Can you make the same claim?'* Two aspects of the microprocessors that formed the heart of KITT were worth noting: firstly, the vox-box had been programmed to address Michael in a familiar, congenial, slightly stuffy Bostonian accent-more effective, in Michael's case, than the female voice originally designed into the unit. Secondly, the microprocessor was programmed to evolve a synthetic 'personality' based on deduction, extrapolation, and its response to the driver it had been specially contoured for – Michael. After nearly a year of working with the machine, Michael automatically thought of it as a partner with human personality – indeed, there were times when he preferred KITT's company to that of any human companion. One byproduct of their mutually developing working relationship was KITT's penchant for debate, and for questioning the human condition. Occasionally, Michael thought, KITT would make a great logician . . . but not a very good philosopher. Sometimes KITT debated, and sometimes he (for Michael thought of KITT as a fellow male from almost the very beginning of their odd relationship) merely argued. He smiled to himself-arguing was a very human trait.

He considered KITT's question, then answered, *'Your way might be easier, but it would certainly be dull.'*

*'Dull? I don't understand.'*

Michael delivered his punch line. *'But then, you'd never know why making love to a German girl could be just as good, while being completely different, from making love to a Russian girl.'*

*'There we are, back on the topic of your overload of female acquaintances,'* lamented KITT. *'We always seem to end up discussing your love life.'*

How he fared at romance was a topic Michael did not care to bash about with KITT today. Recent events made for bad memories.

Following the successful wrap-up of the affair involving the Corazones de Piedras and two warring gangs of munitions pirates in Texas, Michael had begun seeing a Knight Industries technician named Bonnie Barstow regularly. Bonnie had been one of the key scientists in KITT's developmental stages. After Michael joined the FLAG programme, the person he dealt with most after Devon Miles was Bonnie Barstow, who travelled the country in the Knight Industries service truck for KITT, code-named Rook – a mobile lab and diagnostic bay for the super-car. From the first moment Michael had spotted Bonnie stepping down from the Rook truck's cab on an airstrip in Millston, California, he'd been captivated. Bonnie habitually inhabited a curve-hugging white work coverall, and wore her thick mane of brown hair loose and sexy. He'd saved her from a kidnapping during a mission in Los Angeles, and despite all their brother-to-sister banter and double entendres, they'd begun to grow close to each other, to watch out for each other. In Houston she'd really started to warm to him . . . and one thing led to another, as the romance novelists say with such florid phrases as *their passionate rapture could no longer be trapped within the prison of propriety*.

In becoming romantically entangled with Bonnie Barstow, Michael had roused the ire of Devon Miles. Devon had always regarded Bonnie with a protective paternalism. He regarded Michael's conquest of her the way he might view a wild boar running loose in his FLAG office – as an act of vandalism that interfered with the efficiency of the team. To continue, their relationship had to assume undertones of sneakiness and deception. Trying to keep Devon in the dark about anything was doomed to failure, but Michael and Bonnie attempted the foolhardy feat and only made him angrier. Devon would not deny them anything outright – he was too much the British gentleman for such aggressive postures – but the truth could be read in his steely gaze. Michael and Bonnie were surprised when Devon turned out to be right all along. Even though they kept their working and loving relationships admirably separate, Bonnie began to worry about each rough-and-tumble mission to which Michael was assigned, for despite the protection afforded by KITT, the maverick nature of Michael's functions in FLAG left extremely high odds in favour of his getting killed doing his job, if not this time, then soon. Bonnie could withstand every known variety of pressure, and was graceful under fire, but when the pressure involved the man sharing her heart, she became vocally contrary.

Since Michael had devoted his life to FLAG, and she had done likewise, they really had no choice if they were to continue. Past that, they'd been together long enough for her to get a taste of Michael's characteristic wanderlust, and she found the taste sour. When she hugged him goodbye at the terminal of Los Angeles International Airport there were tears in both their eyes.

Bonnie was now head of research for FLAG in the New York offices, no longer doing field work, and pulling down two hundred grand a year. Michael had not yet met her replacement, but he anticipated a burly scientist, perhaps with a humourless New York accent . . .

*'Approaching Calxico,'* announced KITT, snapping Michael back to the present. The car had been in the AUTO CRUISE mode while he reminisced.

'Give me MANUAL,' said Michael, grabbing the wheel. 'Have you got the co-ordinates of the Royal Palms Motel mapped in?'

*'Yes, Michael,'* the vox-box blinked. *'In five-point-two minutes, we'll approach a stop light at the intersection of Main and Seventh Streets.'*

'My, what quaint little street names,' he said, sarcastically. He supposed every town in America had a Main Street, a First Street, or a Broadway.

*'Turn left at the light. Proceed five blocks west, turn right at the light, proceed two blocks north, and you're – we're – there. It's room number seventeen an upstairs room with a southern exposure.'*

Michael followed KITT's instructions and eventually found himself in the parking lot of the Royal Palms, a shabby-looking cinderblock structure covered by a flaking skin of cheap pink paint. The motel sign looked as though it had survived a nuclear blast; paint was scoured off and the sign was canted on its pole. He doubted whether the neon tubes all fired at night. It didn't look to him like the sort of place where he'd find a woman who answered the description Devon had given him of one Joanna St John . . . but here he was, and KITT had never yet got a direction wrong.

'Back in a flash, pal,' he told the car. He patted the fender the way a cowpoke might pat his horse's flank. A black handprint was left in the grey coating of desert dust that shrouded the normally jet-black surface of KITT'S armoured, molecularly-bonded hide.

As he trotted up the steps to Number Seventeen, he could hear a melodic woman's voice speaking in tones of frustrated despair. 'But I've already told you – this is a silk dress. Real silk. Do you know what silk is? When I asked you to have it cleaned, I didn't mean the corner laundorama –'

As Michael neared the open door of Number Seventeen, a wizened little old man, obviously the proprietor of the mom-and-pop motel backed defensively out of the room before Joanna St John emerged. She glanced at Michael – deep blue-grey eyes, only lightly made up, he noticed – and returned her attention to the registration of her complaint. She held out the brutalised remains of a green silk evening dress, extended away from her body as though she was holding a dead dog.

She rolled her eyes, appealing to the gods. ‘Thirty thousand randy little silkworms sacrificed their cocoons to make this dress.’ It was clearly hopeless. Before the manager could protest she draped the savaged garment over his outstretched arms and smiled at him. ‘Why don’t you just keep it? Make it into bathroom window curtains, or doilies, or something?’ She glanced back toward Michael. ‘You’re Michael Knight, correct me if I’m wrong.’ Then back to the manager. ‘Go on; it’s okay – green’s not my colour anyway.’ The little man retreated without a word, relieved to get out of range of this crazy woman. ‘Don’t just stand there like a wooden Indian, Mr Knight, come on in and seat yourself in the conservatory.’ She swept her hand behind her, to indicate the limits of the threadbare little room.

‘In a place like this,’ Michael said, ‘it probably pays not to tax the locals beyond their capacity.’

‘Maybe.’ She gauged him with her eyes. Joanna St John was a willowy natural blonde a shade under six feet tall, who was obviously accustomed to wearing expensive clothes and wearing them well. Her manner was regally self-assured – he could see she was used to getting her way by the set of her generous, yet insolent mouth, the cool scrutiny of those blue-grey eyes, the forward and aggressive body language. Today she wore a tailored pantsuit over expensive calfskin boots, dressed for the West. She was every bit of thirty, alive and cynical, demanding and cultured, and she didn’t look a bit like a widow. She crossed the small room, to the far side of the queen-sized bed, and plucked a newspaper from the nightstand. ‘In these parts they keep a surgically clean bathroom and don’t pester you after you check in. Unless,’ she added ruefully, ‘you ask them to perform a superhuman task like visiting the dry cleaners.’ She was clearly used to having her things picked up and delivered, and Michael wondered if she had ever had to wash dishes or underwear with her own hands anytime in the last decade. Her stride was athletic and graceful. She held the paper out so he could read the headline.

Beneath the 82-point headline was a photograph of Arthur Abrahms, an unflattering shot of him addressing some fellow attorneys from behind a podium at some dinner-and-speech wingding. Vaguely visible, seated in the background, was a pretty blonde who must have been Joanna. She didn't hold the paper out long enough for Michael to really see.

'They murdered him,' she said. 'Blew his head off and left him with five grand in his pocket, to frame him for some vague nonsense involving wetbacks – the sort of trash the press gobbles up.'

'You know differently?'

'Arthur was working for the Attorney General's office on a case he couldn't talk about. It was a federal investigation of some kind.' She sat pertly on the foot of the bed.

Michael stuck his hands in his pockets. 'Then perhaps you should let the government handle the investigation into his death.'

'Wrong,' she said, fixing him again with her merciless eyes. 'Your Mr Miles suggested the same thing, but can't you see this entire case stinks of cover-up? The government will pursue enquiries with all the alacrity of a crippled hippo. People have been bought, for all I know witnesses have been bribed to shut up, and everything has been smoothed over, leaving Arthur dead and me holding nothing except his wealth. I need an advocate who can function outside of all the bureaucratic red tape I know would be thrown against me if I tried to pursue this through conventional channels. That's why I called your Foundation.'

He saw her slowly simmering anger, her frustration, her sheer drive. 'You really loved him, didn't you?' he said quietly. She nodded. 'Otherwise I wouldn't be staying in this pest hole in the middle of Nowheresville.'

Michael's first guilty thought had been that perhaps Joanna had been involved in her husband's death, as an accessory who stood to gain from Abrahms' substantial estate. She'd been divorced several times before, as he knew from the data fetch and biography KITT had called up on his dashboard monitor screens. Joanna St John, before marrying Arthur Abrahms, had already secured enough personal wealth to buy most of the silkworms in China, so he ruled out greed as a factor. He let it drop. 'Anything useful in Arthur's personal effects?'

'Not much. What there is is pretty cryptic.'

He moved closer. 'Let's see.'

She produced a chequebook. Across the page on the back of the cheque register, boxed twice, were the words *Boca Culebra*.

‘The Mouth of the Snake,’ translated Michael. ‘Know what it refers to?’

Joanna shook her head. ‘Try this – I found it under the seat of the Bronco he rented.’ She handed Michael a shard of broken pottery about the size of a salad plate – a curved surface and part of a wheel-turned clay base. The piece was a shell, as though the wall of the vase or pot had been hollowed out. Michael inverted it and fine sand trickled out to fall between his fingers.

‘You know where the Bronco was found?’

‘I thought you’d never ask,’ she said. ‘Care to visit the site?’

‘Yes. Allow me.’

As they drove into the desert she remained mostly silent and self-absorbed. She gave the bounding, varicoloured readout screens of KITT’s Super Dash a curious eye, but asked no questions.

‘Uh-radio,’ Michael said by way of explanation, and when she returned a sceptical glance, he gave her a kind of curdled smile and pushed a cassette into the tape player. KITT’s cabin filled up with Tangerine Dream performing, appropriately, a song titled ‘Mojave Plan’.

Under Joanna’s direction, they were soon traversing the rutted dirt road, retracing the path Arthur had taken on the night of his death. Near the top of the rise the road narrowed; it was rugged but passable. To the left the landscape dropped away to a parallel dirt road that followed the course of the heavy chain link and barbed-wire fence that denoted the American side of the border. Beyond it was a deep ditch gouged out of the parched earth, bordered by another fence on the Mexican side. Michael could make out a section of shiny new fence, where a breach about ten yards wide had been patched.

‘Here,’ Joanna said. ‘Stop here.’

She led him up through a tangle of desert underbrush. ‘There’s where Arthur parked the jeep,’ she pointed. A few steps later, she said, ‘And here’s where the police found the lens cap to his camera.’ She averted her face from his sight for a moment. Michael diplomatically turned and took a great interest in the desert to the west. It was just about high noon.

‘Sorry,’ came her voice from behind him.

He turned back while she was wiping her eyes. He did not wish to linger at the murder site, especially when it was gaining him no clues. He motioned that Joanna should follow him back down to where KITT was parked.

When they were seated, Michael spoke directly to the automobile for the first time, startling Joanna. 'KITT, take us down to the road paralleling the border fence. I want a thumbnail analysis on the tyre tracks down there. Correct me if there's nothing else up on this road – the one we're on now.'

*'Negative, Michael. There is only a single set of tyre tracks new tyres on a four-wheel-drive vehicle of the sort you described Arthur Abrahms as renting.'*

Joanna gawked at the vox-box as KITT spoke. Suddenly the mysterious readouts, the jumping lights before her took on a sinister aspect, and she shifted in her seat.

'Relax,' said Michael. 'KITT – that's this car' – he patted the dashboard as he said it – 'is the latest surprise the microcomputer era has in store for normal citizens just like you.' His jocular air eased her nervousness a bit.

She replaced uneasiness with curiosity as they drove. 'It responds directly to you – it's not a radio?'

'No, KITT is self-contained, although he has computer access to nearly any record-keeping system in the country you'd care to name. He's a microprocessor. A computer. A really neat, sorta regular guy.'

She looked at Michael as though he'd just sprouted a third eye in the middle of his forehead. 'I was afraid of something like this.'

KITT interrupted her by saying, *'Thank you for the compliment, Michael. The feeling is mutual.'*

This time it was Joanna who turned her attention to the desert. Just how was she supposed to deal with this weird Laurel and Hardy team of a chatterbox mobile computer and a rangy, aloof troubleshooter in a black leather jacket? Michael Knight was not at all the sort of assistant she had expected to report in response to her call to the Foundation for Law and Government – he looked more like an anti-establishment rebel.

*'Reading a heavy concentration of overlapping tyre tracks, Michael,'* said KITT. *'At least three different heavy vehicles.'*

They had stopped right beside the patch in the border fence.

'Looks like a couple of armies marched right through here,' he said. They both got out of the car and scanned around.

'Michael, look at this!' Joanna came up from the bushes with a hunk of broken, crudely fired clay very much like the fragment she'd found in Arthur's Bronco.

Michael depressed the console stud marked ANALYSER, and a glove compartment-sized

hatch dropped open from the underside of the dash. The sample was too large, and Michael had to knock off a chunk, being careful not to shatter the delicate hollowing, which reminded him of a chocolate wafer with the filling missing. When the piece fit, he punched the box shut and said, 'What is it?'

A spectrometer reading played out on KITT's number two video monitor while a screen graph gauged shape and density. *'The material is largely an aggregate of granulated particles of hydrous aluminium silicates . . .'*

'You mean clay?'

*'That's what I just said, Michael. Clay, plus a curious residue on the inside walls composed of flakings of an aureate material.'*

'Meaning?'

*'It appears that the clay was moulded around a model, or core, of pure gold. When the clay was broken off, the residue was left inside – gold is a very soft metal.'*

'Something easily hammered into crude pot and vase shapes, and then covered with clay and fired to look like a cheap tourist item . . . just to get it as far as the border. But if that's the case, why smuggle it when you've disguised it so well?'

*'Despite the appearance, the gold's weight will give it away,'* suggested KITT.

'Yeah. And maybe they didn't want to fool border guards. Maybe they wanted to fool other smugglers instead. Joanna, does this mean anything?'

'This is all news to me,' she said, genuinely surprised.

As they drove back to town, Michael said, 'I'm coming back out here tonight. To – '

'Not alone, you're not.'

'Joanna, you shouldn't be involved in this part.' He was thinking of the mercenaries he'd dealt with in Houston, of the guns and disregard for life that had led to a full-fledged firefight in the desert once before.

'Thanks for the concern, but I'm already involved,' she said, 'I never gave much of a damn for the sidelines. While I respect your professional judgement, don't try to play hero and shut me out – Arthur was my husband. I'm not going to play benched cheerleader and *hope* somebody else stumbles over my husband's murderer.'

He entreated her with his eyes, because he honestly did not know what he'd run into the first time out in the field. 'I'll make a deal with you. Let me make the run this evening by myself – just me and KITT. There's nothing I'm not telling you. I just don't have enough to go



on.'

She folded her arms and did not utter a word till they were back in the parking lot of the Royal Palms. When they were out of the car, she said, 'I don't like the idea of celling-up in that damned motel room with the TV set for company through another fruitless night. And I don't like the idea of your damned car eavesdropping on everything we say.' She was unaware that KITT could still hear perfectly, up to a hundred yards distant. 'But I'll abide by your decision, just this once. I might be rushing into this too fast; I might be too eager to get killed for revenge. Take your shot tonight, but I warn you, Michael Knight – once is my limit.' Then she was off, running up the stairs.

*'A headstrong and determined young woman,'* observed KITT.

'You left out gorgeous, old buddy. Be right back.' When he caught up with her he grabbed her arm. 'Okay, lady,' he said. 'You've had your say; now it's my turn. Joanna, I've never been married. But I've been in love and I know how hard it was to lose that.' He was thinking primarily of Bonnie Barstow, somewhere in New York, grimly enjoying her new prestige position with Knight Industries. 'I can only guess at what you're going through right now, but I can see it in your eyes. I can feel the muscles jumping in your arm. You're strung tighter than a drumhead.'

'The great detective,' she responded, as she turned the key in her room door. There was a sudden commotion inside. Michael shoved past her and shouldered the door open just in time to see a pair of feet disappear out the bathroom window. He ran across the room – it had been discreetly but thoroughly searched – and stuck his head out the window. It was two storeys down to an empty lot. The interloper had vanished like a ghost.

He called KITT on his comlink, the wrist-radio device developed by Knight Industries to keep the two of them in constant touch. 'KITT, have you picked up anybody running fast, away from here?'

*'Negative, Michael. Minimal activity.'*

'Damn!' He smacked his fist into his palm. Where had the guy got to?

About the time Joanna regained her composure enough to demand to know what the hell was going on, Michael ran past her, out into the breezeway, down the stairs. When he rounded the corner near the office, he nearly ran headlong into a young man lounging near the Coke machine.

'Hey, did you see – ?' He decided to forget it. He thought of the old joke where the guy runs out of his just-burglarised house and asks the thief which way the crooks went. This

man, calmly sipping a soft drink, obviously had nothing from Joanna's room on him, and his surprise at Michael's appearance meant that in all probability he had not seen anyone jump from Joanna's window, on the other side of the building.

'You've got the whole track to yourself,' the young man said wryly. 'Looking for somebody?'

Michael's eyes checked the pool, the parking lot, the street. Nothing. 'I was . . . never mind, Forget it.'

'That's easy,' said the man, toasting Michael with his soft drink can. 'To forget nothing.' Michael noticed that although the man's hair was conventionally trimmed, he had a peculiar little braid of brown hair that started at the nape of his neck and extended over his shirt collar. It was about three inches long, and barely noticeable, but striking when you finally did notice it. Nor was he conventionally good looking, but his smile was easy and honest, and his eyes were the kind of friendly brown that evoked instantaneous trust. He seemed to have a lot of physical confidence; without knowing anything about him, Michael knew the man was well-versed in street smarts.

'Catch you later,' he said, and strolled off down the street.

'KITT,' said Michael into the comlink. 'This may be nothing, but keep an eye on that guy for as long as you can. If he's got a car, trace it and get me a data fetch on him.'

'*Paranoia, Michael?*' said the car.

'Just grabbing at straws, that's all.'

'*I've got him fixed on my monitor.*'

'Great. Let me go check on Joanna.'

Joanna was shaken, startled, but okay. 'Jeez,' she said wonderingly. And I was worried about standing idly by in my dreary little motel room . . .'

## Chapter 3

'Years ago,' said Eduardo O'Brien, 'a Yaqui shaman told me that "the history of mankind is a history of warfare." If that's true, and I believe it to be true, then you and I will soon stand shoulder to shoulder with the greatest warriors of the past.' The robust golden man laughed quietly, as if at himself, for his own speechmaking.

Elton Matthews stared at his partner and then turned his attention back to the M-90 heavy-bed Army truck. He flicked lint from his suit coat and stuck his hands in his pockets. 'Eduardo, you can have the notoriety,' he joked, 'and I'll just settle for the money, okay?'

'I'll settle for nothing less than both, my friend.'

'You mean you believe in Yaqui shamans, but not the fairy tale about having your cake and eating it too?'

Eduardo laughed his unpleasant laugh again and consulted the gold Rolex watch on his wrist. 'Mythology can be changed by those with bold vision. It's three-twenty-five. I trust the shipment schedule will not be hampered by the little incident of the other night?'

'Not that I can tell,' said Matthews. 'In fact, killing Arthur Abrahms helped us in more than one way – it got rid of him, plus it focused attention on the crossing point we've been using. By drawing attention to where the trucks crossed, the Border Patrol will assume we will relocate, find a new, virgin place to cross. They're not even bothering to watch the old crossing point, from the report I got this morning. So everything's on schedule. I admit I didn't expect it to be.'

'You see? The ultimate complexity is simplification. We do more by doing less. You're learning, Elton – we may make a spiritual man of you, yet.'

Elton considered becoming more like his frightening partner, the man who was so obsessed with gold, the man who loved knives and cutting steel more than he loved beautiful women. Eduardo O'Brien, the half-breed, the assassin, the mercenary. No, he decided, he did not wish to become very much like O'Brien.

Dressed completely in black, Michael squatted in the underbrush. The desert quiet was unearthly; there wasn't a soul, a sound or a sign of life. This was the killing boredom of the stakeout routine, something with which he had learned to cope while working for the police in Reno – a physically exhausting ordeal of non-action that seemed to make itself necessary to most phases of police work. KITT was parked further down the trail, out of sight. It was midnight.

Devon Miles had expressed his usual droll interest in what Michael had to report, earlier in the day. The entire case was starting to add up to much more than wetback illegal aliens and one lawyer framed to look like he was on the take. When dealing with his FLAG superior in person, Michael found Devon's dry British authoritarianism easier to take. He seemed like a different person when communicating via long-distance video, as though the real Devon Miles and the tiny image appearing on KITT's monitor screen, asking questions and disbursing orders, was another persona entirely; some kind of malignant twin brother. Michael had never asked Devon about his family. He assumed there was one. He made a mental note to bring it up when he returned to Los Angeles.

Devon had discovered that the young man Michael had encountered outside the Royal Palms Motel was named David Dalton, last known address an apartment in Washington, DC. Arthur Abrahms had been a Federal attorney – maybe there was some kind of connection. But he began to suspect that Dalton wasn't hanging around the motel looking for the world's greatest burrito.

There was nothing left to do but wait.

At about one-thirty in the morning there was a brief semaphore signal, a flashing light blinking three times. From the Mexico side, three flashes answered, and Michael heard heavy-duty engines fire up.

'KITT,' he whispered into the comlink. 'How many?'

*'Two vans and a rather heavily guarded truck, Michael. They're headed for the fence.'*

'I'm going to work my way down the hill and hitch a ride. I'll bet those trucks are loaded with fake pottery, and I want to see where it goes.'

*'What am I supposed to do while you're down there, foolishly risking your neck?'*

'You're my diversion, old buddy. As soon as they cross, I want you to make with the headlights, the dust, the wheel-squealing exit, as though you'd just seen them and were getting away. They'll try to cut you off where the path converges with the main road. Make

sure they don't. Then home in on my comlink and follow after you've lost them.' With that, Michael started carefully picking his way down the hill in the dark.

*'Just grand,'* KITT said, unthrilled by his assignment. It had taken the microprocessor nearly a year to become accustomed to Michael's wild plunges into outright risk of life and limb.

Michael was almost hurled headlong into an outcrop of cactus as his boot heel blundered over a hunk of caliche. The whole hillside was made of the crumbly chalklike rock; how it could support any kind of plantlife, Michael had no idea. He fell the final ten feet, rolling end over end and landing face down in a ditch dug near the road by rain and erosion, one of those large earthen cracks that looked like miniature quake faults. It provided perfect cover; it would have been an excellent hiding place even in the daytime.

The grumble of truck engines approached from the south. Michael reversed his position in the ditch and hunkered down. At least one sentry would be walking along on foot, preceding the whole caravan.

'Now, KITT!'

*'Michael, I hate this,'* the machine came back.

'Just do it or I'm sunk!'

*'Here goes nothing, as the acrobats say . . .'*

Up on the crease of the rise, KITT peeled out and instantly got everyone's attention. Brown clouds of dust billowed in the headlamps of the black racer as it hauled down toward the junction of the two dirt roads.

Guards, shouting, dropped from the trucks and vans and ran ahead, unslinging machineguns – Uzis, Michael noticed. They sprayed KITT with slugs as the car bounced through the junction, going fast, but not too fast, to give them a good show. The rough desert trail meant nothing as far as KITT's suspension was concerned; he could have gone even faster. But his diversion gave Michael just enough time to worm around behind the caravan and lift himself noiselessly over the tailgate of the largest truck. He dropped the canvas flap back into place. There was no one riding in the back – at least, not for the moment.

About twenty wooden crates were lashed to the restraining hooks in the truck bed. They rocked to and fro with the lurching progress of the trucks on the rutted road. The crates were nailed shut.

Michael drew a penlight out of his jacket and searched the back of the truck for something with which he could pry one of the nearest crates open. The guards were still

shouting but the shooting had only taken about ten seconds before stopping. KITT was long gone. He pictured the sleek black car shifting into the PURSUIT mode and making them eat his dust, and the image made Michael smile.

On the far side of the right rear wheel well, a rusty crowbar was attached to the inside wall of the truck bed. It made sense, if this sort of shipment was made regularly. Michael unclipped it – carefully, so as not to alert the drivers with any undue noise-and wedged the flat end beneath the wooden lip of the closest crate. He heaved downward, applying pressure steadily; just jacking the box open with gorilla strength might cause the nails to squeak, or the wood to split with a tortured noise like an animal run down on the highway. The crate lid eased upward. The nails were longer than Michael expected, but once he had a grip on the underside of the lid, he was able to gently push it the rest of the way.

The bundles inside were wound in heavy brown paper. He drew one out, keenly conscious of its crackling, paper-sack noise. He used a penknife to slice through the thickness of paper, which he split open like a peanut husk and stuffed out the canvas flap. Just then the truck huffed over a large mud rut that caused Michael to bounce and land on his butt. He nearly dropped the glazed clay pot to shatter on the hard surface of the truck bed.

He turned it slowly, examining it. Heavy pottery, the sort of cheap Tijuana tourist junk he had expected. *Much* too heavy, as KITT had speculated.

He cushioned the pot sideways between his legs and gave it a single sharp rap with the crowbar. The fired clay clanked as it broke apart.

The smooth, pitted surface of rough-moulded gold threw his penlight beam back at him, lighting his face up with the yellow colour.

‘KITT, if you can still read me, we just hit the jackpot . . . I think.’ There was no response; KITT was probably in the next state by now, if he had maintained top speed. Just hang onto my tail, buddy, he thought.

He replaced the pot among its fellows in the crate and eased the lid back into place. Then he settled into the rear of the truck for a long, uncomfortable ride to God only knew where.

Frank Austin, the lead driver, pulled into the loading yard at the crack of dawn. A guard leapt from one of the vans to unlock the hurricane fence and roll it back; another unlocked the louvered steel door of the hangar-like warehouse built on the grounds. The caravan parked inside the warehouse. The gate was shut but the building’s doors remained open to the morning air.

Frank lifted the black Uzi submachine gun in the seat next to him, stepped down from the truck cab, and started bellowing orders. 'All right – Joe Bob, fire up the forklift! Mace, Richards, let's get these suckers unloaded and I do mean now!'

Through a crack in the canvas Michael watched the man on the forklift. The crates of phoney pottery with him in the truck were stacked on wooden pallets; the conclusion was obvious. He had to get to other cover before Joe Bob exposed his presence. When he kneeled to peer out for clear cover, his elbows, knees, and shoulder muscles all painfully informed him that they did not much approve of the position into which they'd been cramped over the last few hours. When Michael swung his leg over the truck tailgate, he felt his joints snap, crackle and pop like a certain wonderful breakfast cereal.

And then something had a hold of his leg, before he even touched ground.

He felt first the sensation of being rudely yanked off the truck's tailgate; then he heard the guttural snarling. As he landed on his back on the concrete floor of the warehouse, pain shooting into his skull, his vision cleared and his coordination returned just in time for him to intercept a large and spectacularly ugly Rottweiler guard dog the colour of a mud puddle. He reached out defensively and locked his hands around the beast's throat as it's slavering jaws sought his jugular vein. It took all his strength to stabilize the madly jerking and whipping dog. It seemed insane; its hot and fetid breath flew into Michael's face along with flecks of white, bubbly drool. The Rottweiler's mouth was all fangs, its eyes were red, and it thrashed about in Michael's grasp like a shark, eager to kill him. There were a lot of mean muscles in that squat, powerful body.

He needed to shift, get some kind of leverage, a bodily advantage, or he was going to lose his life to an ugly dog!

'Jonas!' It was Frank Austin's voice, a sharp command. The Rottweiler ceased its attack but stayed right where it was. 'Break, Jonas!'

Michael flinched – at first he thought the gun-toting guard was ordering the dog to kill him. But Jonas, all hideous, rabid, lunatic seventy-five pounds of him, let go of Michael's shirtfront and pulled a parade rest, itching to start all over again. One of Michael's shirt buttons dropped out of the dog's mouth and rolled across the floor.

'You're in radically deep trouble, boy,' said Frank, motioning with his Uzi. 'On your feet, and I do mean now.' To goose Michael's slowness-more a result of the cramped trip than any defence gambit – he prodded him with the weapon. 'Let's have your name.'

Michael stood up and let his eyes assume a kind of dreamy, half-focus. 'Wow, a freakin'

dog,' he mused. 'I sure as hell hope this is San Diego, brother.' He brushed floor dirt from his jacket.

'What are you talking about?'

'Well, y'know, I mean, I hitched onto you in Yuma. I didn't mean no harm, brother, I just –'

'Wait a minute. You hitched a ride in the back of the truck?' Frank's eyes narrowed. 'Where in Yuma? We didn't stop in Yuma.' He looked ready to give Jonas the command to kill.

'No, but you stopped at the border station checkpoint to go to the bathroom,' said Michael, thinking the less smart he appeared, the more of a head start he'd have on these goons. Instead of further explanation he merely shrugged.

Frank hesitated. He knew it was true.

'Well, I didn't mean to cause no trouble. I'll be moving on. God bless you, brother.' Michael turned to leave and for a second the fake almost worked. Frank, the dog, and two other guards of the four stood rooted, as though they couldn't believe Michael would just try to simply walk away.

Frank snapped out of it first. He was the one whose butt would land in a nice big sling if the slightest detail went awry during the shipments for O'Brien and Matthews. Matthews would send that crazy Mexican to slice out his liver with a paring knife. Even if the lanky stranger were a real hitchhiker, Frank could not afford to just let him go. 'I'm afraid not, boy,' he said. 'Mace, take him.' Mace and his buddy Richards grabbed Michael from either side.

'What the hell is this!' protested Michael.

To his men Frank Austin said, 'This poor old boy's about to become a statistic. I guess we can leave his body in the desert during the drive back.'

The men nodded. Joe Bob had left his forklift to see what was going on; they all had a schedule to keep. Two more men had climbed out of the vans.

Michael timed his move, then went for it.

He dug his heels into the floor and swung his burly captors into each other, face-first. He knew Frank would have his gun up in seconds, or order the dog, Jonas, to kill, but time stretched out when you started a free-for-all and he'd deal with it. As Mace and Richards collided he kicked Richards in the throat. His eyes went white and he collapsed onto the floor. Frank was shouting.

Then, suddenly, Frank pitched clumsily forward, his sub-machinegun flying harmlessly away. He had been booted in the back of the head by a man clad entirely in black, and



wearing a Ninja warrior wrap around his face to conceal his identity. Only his piercing brown eyes were visible.

Jonas was laying on the floor with his tongue hanging out, either dead or unconscious.

Mace pivoted and punched Michael in the jaw, snapping his skull around. Michael fell to his knees, his body was still locking up on him. The Ninja-like interloper flew over Michael, foot first, and planted his heel into the middle of Mace's nose, which crunched loudly in the cement acoustics of the warehouse.

Joe Bob and the two others had their guns out and were running toward them. About that time, Frank stood up right in the middle of their line of fire, still screaming at the motionless Jonas to *attack, attack, attack*, and flailing at Michael. Frank was a big man with a gun but not much of brawler despite his size. Without his gun and his attack dog didn't present a threat. Michael landed a solid right to Frank's chin and Frank fell away into dreamland.

His unknown, black-clad saviour had raced away to meet the other three men head-on.

Joe Bob cut loose a burst of slugs at the black wraith, but they all flew high as the man dived to the floor and launched upward in an elaborate tae-kwondo somersault. He slapped one guard silly with a flurry of jabbing chops, then with quick economy of motion, pivoted again and lodged his elbow into the second guard's eye. He staggered back, clawing at his face. Joe Bob threw a muscular left cross, but he seemed to be moving in slow motion next to the man in black, who ducked around the blow. He grabbed the still-punching arm, A cranked it toward the warehouse ceiling with an audible crunch of tendons, then knocked Joe Bob's feet from beneath him with a sweeping kick. Joe Bob cracked his noggin on the concrete, and never felt the follow-through blow that put his lights out.

Michael remembered his comlink. 'KIT T, if you're out there, I need you pronto!'

His mysterious ally was already sprinting for the warehouse door. The six men from the trucks were sprawled and flung about like laundry sacks . . . seven, if you counted the blissfully unconscious form of Jonas.

'Hey-!' Michael shouted at the figure. 'Wait a minute!' He tried to run to the door but his leg muscles cramped up, complaining to his brain. Too much inactivity was not instantly cured by a fifteen-second fight, and Michael feared he might have striated a ligament or two.

Through the door he could see the welcome form of KIT T bulleting ahead of a vapour trail of dust, aimed straight for the locked hurricane fence.

The black-clad intruder jumped effortlessly over the fence and ran unintentionally into the path of the speeding black street machine. Michael gasped, shutting his eyes.

When he opened them the intruder was airborne – but he had not been mowed down. He had leapt over KITT's dusty hood at the crucial moment.

KITT's familiar voice-amalgam came over the comlink, *'Michael, who – or what – was that?'* Then the car hit the fence, blowing through, knocking steel posts into the sky and mashing industrial chain-link flat by the yard. It slid to a smoking halt in front of Michael, the pilot door popping automatically open.

'I don't know, KITT, but I'm gonna find out! After him!'

KITT spun rubber in the warehouse compound, kicking up a cloud of dust and sand and sliding around in a one-eighty speed take-off.

They caught up with the black figure just as he ducked between two more buildings on the right side of the road.

*'Michael, are you intact?'* said the car.

'Stiff but in one piece. Don't lose him!'

*'My scanners indicate that this access dead-ends in approximately fifty more yards. He has no place to run.'*

They could see the man now. He had not broken speed. Unless one of those doors is unlocked,' said Michael. 'Or he finds a rope to shinny up.'

As he spoke, the man in black-without even glancing back to check on KITT's pursuit – found an aluminium drainpipe and scaled the side of the building as agilely as a spider rappelling along a strand of web.

Michael cursed his luck and spun the wheel, in an attempt to head off his benefactor on the opposite side of the industrial building. He and KITT went screaming down the narrow alleyway they found there just as the man leapt, puma-like, from roof to roof over their heads without the slightest hesitation or acknowledgement of hazard. He was like a high – wire walker, trained to the sky, unafraid of falling.

*'That's quite extraordinary,'* put in KITT. *'I've never seen a human being move like that before.'*

'Me neither,' said Michael. 'But I've got to catch him, stop him and thank him – he saved my bacon back there.'

*'I beg your pardon?'*

'Saved my – oh, never mind.' KITT always had difficulty with colloquialisms.

'I have our quarry sighted, Michael, on the far side of this structure, making for open ground.'

'Let's go scoop him up.'

The red neon numerals on KITT's digital speedometer began to accumulate rapidly. Together they fishtailed out into what looked like a vast, paved parking area, and the man in black was right in the middle of it, making for the wood-land on the far side of the lot like a jackrabbit.

'Pop the roof, KITT-I think I'm going to have to tackle him.'

*'You were just complaining that you were damaged-stiff, you said.'*

'I don't *like* the bloody idea. Just do it, okay, and stop giving me grief?'

*'As you wish.'*

The retractable roof panel slid back and the Super Dash switched smoothly over to AUTO PURSUIT as Michael climbed through the hatchway. The yardage between KITT and the running man in the modern-day Ninja get-up was quickly being eaten away.

The running man tried to feint to the left and fake out his pursuer, but KITT corrected course with computer speed.

He'll try that once more, thought Michael. Just to see if that technique is useless, he'll try.

The man dodged again as predicted, and when KITT swerved to correct, Michael launched himself off the roof of the car to bulldog him. He caught the man's shoulders, and as KITT sheared off to avoid striking them, both men tumbled to the hot tarmac, momentum rolling them along.

The man in black knew how to fall down, realised Michael. The most important rule of physical combat. He used his inertia to come back to a standing position, but being tangled in Michael's grasp threw his balance off. They scrambled around on the ground for a moment. Michael's benefactor managed to get to his feet first, and when Michael stood up he found himself facing down the hard brown eyes behind the Ninja mask. The man in black had assumed an offensive stance. If Michael were to try anything, he was sure his brains would go flying all over the parking lot thanks to some obscure Oriental death blow.

He held his hands palms-out. 'I just want to talk to you. You got me out of a jam back there, and I owe you, and I think we're fighting against the same people.'

The man in black's fingers twitched, just perceptibly. Nothing else moved. Michael couldn't tell whether the man was thinking about dismembering him . . . or just thinking. He held his attack pose.

'I think we're on the same side – whoever you are.'

'Who do you think I am?' said the man. There was a whisp of amusement in his voice.

'I have no idea – but if Hollywood finds out what you can do, I'll bet they make a TV

series out of you in no time.' The man in black chuckled. 'You didn't handle yourself so badly back there, either.'

'Without your rescue I'd be rotting in the desert about now.'

'Agreed.' He relaxed. 'You need to develop faster reflexes, to question the impossible less. I faked you out so easily back at the Royal Palms Motel I could hardly believe it myself.'

'What are you talking about?' Michael thought he already knew, and felt like a patsy.

'I watched you look out of the bathroom window. You looked down. I went up. I was onto the roof, over, and down into the parking lot before you had time to run down the stairs in front.' Pointedly he added, 'Not counting the time it took me to get a Coke out of the machine, slowpoke.'

'David Dalton?' Michael remembered the name from the preliminary data fetch Devon had called up.

The man peeled the black hood from his head, and Michael saw the peculiar little warrior braid of hair sticking downwards along the nape of his neck.

'At your service,' he said, and bowed.

# Chapter 4

Michael rang up Devon on KITT's communications system to ensure that the warehouse guards would be detained by the authorities, so he and David Dalton would not have to loiter around the site. When Michael nonchalantly ordered KITT to do several things, and KITT, just as nonchalantly, responded automatically, David gaped in much the same way as Joanna St John had, but his expression was mostly one of detached curiosity. David Dalton was a man who did not like to be impressed by an overabundance of electronic and mechanical gadgetry – a trait Michael more or less expected in someone who had made his own body into a machine of sorts. David wouldn't like depending on automated assistance.

To ease the mood, Michael indicated the Super Dash and said casually, 'Don't worry. He doesn't bite.'

Dalton arched an eyebrow. 'He?'

*'Perhaps I'd better handle this, Michael,' said KITT. 'Allow me to introduce myself, sir – I am the Knight Industries Two Thousand microprocessing unit. Acronym: KITT. At your service. You already know my partner, Michael Knight.'*

David laughed. 'Clever. But I never had much use for computers, myself.'

*'I assure you, Mr Dalton, that I am much more than an ordinary computer.'*

'It sounds like a prissy schoolteacher,' he said to Michael. 'Like a guy I had for math class in the eighth grade. This thing must be one of old Wilton Knight's overpriced little toys.'

*'I beg your pardon,'* said KITT, miffed.

'No offence, but all computers have ever done for me was screw up my bank balance, disconnect my phone, send me junk mail, and get me on phone solicitation lists I never wanted to be on in the first place.' David watched the landscape zoom by outside his window.

*'No offence,'* repeated KITT, *'but the problems you describe are directly attributable in each case to human intervention. Humans accessing computer statistics. Humans coding the wrong numbers into the system ...'*

'Garbage in, garbage out,' put in Michael as he drove.

‘ . . . Humans selling address lists to other humans, who put them in other computers. Humans not following simple operational instructions. Humans . . . ’

‘That’s enough, KITT,’ said Michael. ‘I think we get the picture.’

‘Humans interrupting,’ finished KITT, slyly.

‘Look,’ Michael said to his passenger, ‘like it or not, I think you and I are nibbling at the same piece of cheese. Maybe we should pool our resources.’

‘Wrong,’ said David. ‘All you guys have done from the beginning is interfere and screw things up.’ He spoke with the clipped air of a professional dealing with a bunch of strict amateurs. ‘Starting with Arthur Abrahms’ wife, coming down here to snoop around like a kid playing detective. I’m surprised they haven’t killed her yet. Probably dumb luck. I suggest you get her out of here before they find out who she is.’

‘You didn’t do such a bang-up job in the motel room yourself, you know. What did you expect to find by rifling through Joanna’s stuff?’

David shrugged. He wasn’t sure. ‘What does the Foundation for Law and Government expect to get out of all this, answer me that.’

‘Joanna St John requested our assistance.’

‘You see? Proof she doesn’t know what she’s doing, and should stay the hell out of it.’

‘You know Joanna?’

‘I knew her husband. Arthur and I used to play racquetball.’ He paused, smiled. ‘Terrific lawyer. Lousy backhand.’ An uncomfortable silence fell between them. ‘What else do you want to know?’ he said, fully aware that he was not revealing anything he did not care to.

Michael called up the data fetch on KITT’s number one screen. He pointed. ‘That’s all I know,’ he said. ‘Cards on the table.’

Dalton leaned over and inspected the sparse dossier. It listed a nickname, ‘Doolin’ – Dalton, from the old Eagles song. It had the address of the Washington DC apartment and noted his friendship with a former Justice Department member named Archibald Hendley. There were a lot of blanks regarding exactly what David did . . . other than vanish for weeks at a time. He settled back into his seat. ‘Why don’t we just keep it that way?’ he said. ‘I prefer working alone, anyway. Teaming up with you wouldn’t gain me anything – you know even less than I do.’

‘That warehouse back there is full of phoney pots concealing half a ton of solid gold,’ said Michael. ‘That’s mystery number one. Mystery number two is finding out what *Boca Culebra* might be, and what it has to do with Arthur Abrahms’ death, since – ’

‘The Mouth of the Snake,’ corrected David.

‘Yeah, I know. But what *is* the Mouth of the Snake?’

David shrugged. ‘I’d rather not play Watson to some half-baked Sherlock Holmes from the Foundation, okay?’

Michael blew out a breath, exasperated. ‘What do you know about the Foundation?’

‘One of Wilton Knight’s pipedreams. Not a bad idea – an assistance mechanism for those in need. But there’s too much money behind it. Wilton Knight was all right; Hendley told me about the way he constantly bucked the Defence Department and told them where to go everytime they tried to “append” one of his new scientific developments. But Knight’s dead now – as dead as old Howie Hughes – and the Foundation has no guiding spirit. Look at the developments since Knight died: an enormous legal arm, corporate stock dabbling, autonomy from Federal taxation. The Foundation, as Knight envisioned it, wouldn’t have allowed anybody to ride around in a car like this, with the personal data of anybody you desire right at your fingertips – that’s invasion of privacy, man.’

‘No more than what the government has on anybody already,’ said Michael, unenthusiastically.

‘That’s no defence,’ David shot back. ‘Your name – Knight I assume is some kind of cover. You work for a Brit named Devon Miles.’

‘A Brit?’ said KITT.

‘An Englishman,’ clarified Michael.

‘And have worked for him for about a year; a little more, actually. Whatever you did before then is a mystery.’

And rightly so, thought Michael. Ghosts from his former life as Michael Long, detective, Homicide, Reno Police Department, still crowded in on his brain much too often. There was the sting operation that had resulted in his favourite partner, Ralph ‘Muntzy’ Muntz, getting killed, and Michael himself getting his face blown off in the middle of the Nevada desert before Wilton Knight had dropped down from the sky like some mythological god to save his skin. Before that there was the horror of a Viet Cong interrogation camp, during that little ‘police action’ in Southeast Asia that had cost so many good, young lives. Michael had sustained injuries there that had necessitated the installation of a metal plate into his skull – a plate that had saved his life when a conniving female cobra named Tanya Walker had shot him in the face at point-blank range. All the events of his life seemed inexorably interconnected; apparently random events all linking together into a neat, logical chain. He

wondered what kind of link David Dalton was supposed to be.

‘Okay, okay,’ said Michael. ‘Bottom line: you’re a hell of a resource and I’d rather be working with you than against you. I’m not a joiner, normally. I hate team *anything*. I think together we could draw fewer blanks on this case than we could working apart.’ He waited a beat, for effect, then added in a more strident tone, ‘How many excuses do you want? *You* know how good you are!’

David infuriated him by sitting smugly and saying nothing.

Michael gave up. To hell with it. ‘Where do you want me to drop you off?’ he said without hope.

‘Let’s go to the Royal Palms,’ David said finally. ‘Let’s meet Joanna St John and talk to her – you can introduce me. Then I’ll decide.’

‘Full speed, KITT,’ commanded Michael, adding in his mind, ‘before this guy changes his mind.’

‘Who on earth is *that*?’ said Joanna upon walking into her motel room. Michael leaned on the dresser; David sat with his feet on the bedspread, reading the newspaper account of Arthur Abrahms’ murder.

‘David Dalton,’ said Michael, ‘meet Joanna St John, and vice-versa.’ To her confused, questioning expression he added, ‘He’s the one who we caught in here yesterday – also checking into Arthur’s death. He says he knew Arthur.’

‘I lied,’ said David, not even glancing up from the paper.

‘What?’ Michael was taken off-guard.

‘I lied about knowing Arthur Abrahms,’ David said without any further embroidery.

‘You mean you didn’t know him, didn’t play racquetball with him?’

‘That’s right, Sherlock – you’re thinking all the time.’

‘Arthur didn’t play racquetball,’ said Joanna, still vaguely stunned. ‘He had to see a chiropractor about his back all the time.’ She set down her packages, which included some groceries and a current newspaper.

David stood up, walked over to Joanna, and gave her a visual once-over. She was high-breasted, long-legged, very pretty, but he did not let his gaze linger anywhere except on her blue-grey eyes. ‘With all due respect, *Miss* St John, I think you’d be much better off, and much happier, if you got your privileged little *derrière* onto the next airplane back to Washington DC, and caught up on all those society luncheons and bridge games with your rich pals in



Georgetown. I'm sure you've missed all kinds of great gossip by now, and I wouldn't want to deprive you of any more.' Then he turned and went back to his seat.

She stood there like a servant who does not realise she has just been cashiered, then her reactionary anger boiled up and blotted out her embarrassment. When he turned his back on her, she noticed for the first time his odd, black nightfighting get-up, and the strange warrior braid of hair peeking over the cowl collar of the suit.

'For your information, Mr, uh –'

'Dalton,' Michael put in.

'Mr Dalton, I haven't played bridge in years . . . and the only society luncheons I attend are for charity, and, and . . . and *why am I explaining all this to you?* Who the hell are you? I think I'm owed an explanation, and I want it right now!'

'See?' David made a hopeless gesture to Michael. 'Rich people think they're entitled to everything. She gets more news coverage than the Boston Celtics during a good season. She's too visible. She's going to get her pretty little high society face blown right off by a bunch of bad guys – try to convince her of that, please. Or you don't have my help.'

Michael was stuck on the seesaw, exerting no control whatsoever over what was happening. That had to change, and quickly. Then both David and Joanna started talking at the same time.

'Just who is this nonentity, Michael, we certainly don't need any help from –'

'Typical rich girl attitude; "I can do it all myself," with everybody's free help, of course, what bull –'

'Hold it!' barked Michael. Both of them were talking to him directly, each strenuously trying to ignore the existence of the other. If playing referee put him back in the driver's seat, he was all for it. 'Time out! Both of you are forgetting that all three of us are after the same thing. Joanna wants to avenge her husband's death. She involved the Foundation – and now the gold involves us even more; this has become much bigger than a simple murder investigation and frame-up. But why are you interested, David?'

'Fair enough,' said David. 'I want to nail Eduardo O'Brien. I could kill him, but that's not satisfactory – I want to get him legally; have him sent to prison.'

'Who is Eduardo O'Brien?' said Joanna.

'For one thing, pretty lady, he's the guy who killed Arthur. If he didn't do it personally, he gave the order and one of his toadies did it. You can be sure the blame routes back to O'Brien one way or another.'

With a superior, snide tone, Joanna said, 'Why don't you try something complicated – like having him booked for suspicion of murder?'

'Difficult for two reasons. Number one: no proof – I need ironclad information that simple police work won't gain me. Number two: O'Brien moves in very select circles; he's quite wealthy.' Tossing her meanness back at her, he said, 'You two probably share some upper-crust acquaintances.'

'In that case,' she said, 'you'd better not try to finesse me out of this investigation – I might be able to get you into some circles where your type wouldn't normally be allowed through the front door.'

'I prefer back doors myself,' said David, deflecting her barb. 'You meet a more interesting class of people in the kitchen.'

'Any thoughts on who O'Brien's contact in the States might be?' said Michael.

'Why do you assume he has a contact here?'

'The trucks, the regular shipments. Somebody has to control this end of it.'

'There's a construction outfit in Los Angeles run by a guy named Elton Matthews,' said David. 'He handles both ends – despatching the shipments by radio from O'Brien's yacht, which is outside the boundaries of US or Mexican waters most of the time, and then helicoptering back to the States to collect the stuff on the LA end. That warehouse was just a way-station.'

'Makes sense,' said Michael. 'The trucks return across the state line to the Sonoran desert, and other trucks come down from LA to pick up the stuff and transport it. Joanna, do you know Elton Matthews?'

'I know *of* him. Pretty well-heeled; contributes a lot to charities for tax write-offs. I may have been introduced; I don't remember offhand.'

'Not good enough.' David was shaking his head.

'But if you guys will meet me in LA, I'll bet I can turn up a contact for Matthews within twenty-four hours.'

Michael and David looked at each other sceptically. Joanna was already throwing items back into her suitcase. 'I'd suggest we get packing.'

'What the hell does she mean, *we*?', said David, cocking his thumb at her as she bustled around.

'We, as in the three of us.'

'Unless,' she stopped to smile poisonously at him, her point made, 'you want to keep

sneaking in through the servants' entrance.'

*'Michael, our estimated time of arrival in Los Angeles will be approximately four-forty-five p.m. You might want to set your watch back one hour.'*

'Thanks, KITT. Forgot about Pacific Standard Time.'

'A million bucks in technology,' mused David, 'And for what? A talking clock. You can get those at Radio Shack for twenty bucks.'

'KITT's capable of a lot more than telling time. You'll see.' David's characteristic shrug said otherwise. 'Which reminds me. You held back on something up in the motel room. What was it?'

'Mighty perceptive of you.'

'I read your eyes. Isn't that one of the first signs of intended action in a fighter – checking out where his sightlines go? You were about to say something and then held back.'

'Mostly out of deference to our poor little rich girl,' said David. 'She's got a real sharp tongue – I rather like that.'

'I noticed you noticed.'

'Well, given the possibility she might put us in touch with Matthews, I didn't want to scare her. But Eduardo O'Brien is no one to trifle with. He's a big independent operator, formerly a member of the Mexican Mob. You know what kind of muscle it takes to split from that crowd and remain breathing?'

*'Mucho macho muscle,'* said Michael.

'You got it. They stay out of each other's way for a very good reason – the stories of what O'Brien has done to some of his competitors who *didn't* back off might turn Joanna's hair a very even white colour.'

'Such as?'

'Six months ago O'Brien bought some stolen documents from the Department of Defence – that's another thing; he's going big time, if we're to draw any conclusions from that fact, plus the gold. The guy who sold O'Brien the documents was found a week later in the Potomac river.'

Michael nodded. 'Floating face-down, I'll bet.'

'Not exactly. Divers had to collect all the guy's pieces with a fishing net. A very fine-mesh fishing net.'

'Oh.'

‘Agents were put on the case right away. One of them, a guy I knew, discovered the combination to the safe on O’Brien’s elusive yacht. They got him about five minutes after he gave the combination to me, over the phone.’ David paused for a minute, then decided to finish. ‘Somebody used an African skinning knife on him, starting with the toes and working their way up over a period of forty-eight hours. They kept him conscious with drugs. That’s what the coroner said . . . and it took the coroner three days just to identify what was left.’

‘O’Brien?’

‘Yeah, he’s got a thing for knives in particular, and any kind of weapon in general.’

‘Do you still have the combination? Do you think the documents might be in O’Brien’s safe?’

‘I’ll never know, now. I checked out the yacht during one of O’Brien’s little parties. I got in – but the combination on the safe had already been changed. I barely got out. That’s the way it is with O’Brien – just when you think you have a solid lead, it evaporates.’

‘Maybe Joanna will change our luck.’

‘Maybe,’ he agreed. ‘Maybe she’ll just get us killed faster. But I doubt she can do anything anyway – you don’t just waltz into town, pick up the phone, and get invited to a shindig with either Matthews *or* O’Brien.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Michael wistfully. ‘I think Joanna’s capable of a lot more than we give her credit for.’ When David did not answer he said, ‘What about the gold?’

‘As far as I know, O’Brien turns it into cash as quickly as possible after getting it into the States, which is odd, because the rate of exchange was better running from the US *into* Mexico . . . at least until the floor fell out of the peso down there.

‘Meaning?’ Michael didn’t get it.

*‘Meaning Mr O’Brien has a surfeit of gold,’* stated KITT. *‘He has so much of it that he is not interested in the highest rate of exchange, which indicates that he perhaps has some more immediate goal in mind, outside of turning money into more money.’*

‘You got it,’ said David. ‘Your little computer pal isn’t so stupid after all.’

‘He has his moments,’ said Michael with a grin.

## Chapter 5

David and Michael kept their appointed rendezvous with Joanna St John at the Miramar Hotel complex. They grabbed an elevator up to her suite, and found her preparing a mid-afternoon repast. A glimmering silver tea service was laid out precisely according to Vanderbilt, and there were various delectable-looking tidbits on polished trays. Joanna looked more in her element in the lushly-furnished two-rooms-plus-kitchenette-plus-bath. She had changed into a flowing, loose-fitting shirt secured by drawstrings with tassels, and designer pants with stripes by Von Ames. She wore the expensive garments with the casual indifference and unforced grace of the well-to-do.

‘I take it you can accommodate a black-tie invitation?’ she said to Michael as they entered – as though David was not even in the room.

‘Sure. My tuxedo is on ice down at the Foundation office. But what for?’

Triumphantly she announced, ‘Because I have a banquet invitation this evening. Elton Matthews is throwing a birthday party tonight, and its going to be held at one of the Ragsdale beach houses – you know, the ones with all the levels, and balconies, designed by that famous architect . . . ?’

‘Noel de Sousa,’ said David, not expecting a response.

‘Any chance Eduardo O’Brien will attend?’ said Michael.

‘Not likely,’ David snorted.

With an icy stare directed at David, Joanna said, ‘It’s O’Brien’s birthday. The party’s for him.’ When both men looked questioningly at her, she added, ‘Priscilla Ragsdale – yes, *the* Priscilla Ragsdale – had a townhouse next to mine in Georgetown before she and Johnny moved to LA. Johnny’s an entertainment lawyer, and so he knows a lot of luminaries and business people, including Matthews. *Voilà!*’

‘That’s a pretty good trick,’ admitted Michael.

‘But how do we use this?’ said David. ‘We’ve got to make a plan . . .’

‘*You* don’t have to make anything. Just sit tight. The invitation is for me and my escort.’

She folded her arms, daring him to try and knock her down with a comeback.

‘There’s a lot of gigolos in LA,’ David shot back contemptuously. ‘Why don’t you go hire one? I may need Michael for something else?’

‘Really?’ Michael glanced back toward the door, anticipating some other new development David had kept secret.

‘I’ll tell you outside, in the car.’ He picked up a cookie off the serving tray, then threw it back with a distasteful grimace on his face. ‘God.’

‘Would you mind not . . . not *manhandling* those? Those are imported English butter biscuits.’

‘Imported poison,’ he said. ‘Brimming over with all kinds of good stuff, like artificial preservatives, artificial colours, artificial flavours, white sugar, sawdust . . .’

‘In that case,’ said Michael, trying to keep the peace, ‘give me two more.’

‘They’ve been eating these in England for five centuries and no one has –’

‘Yeah,’ he laughed. ‘And look what became of the Empire. He decided to capitulate to Joanna for the time being. ‘Look, what time is this wingding at the beach house?’

‘Seven-thirty. Sharp.’

‘Okay, then Michael and I are going to have to hustle if we’re to get him back here on time.’

‘Doing what?’ she said.

‘Uh – you’ll find out at the party, okay?’ said Michael, to draw her fire from David. The reply seemed to satisfy her.

David was already up and headed for the door. The rest of the suite held no interest for him now. ‘Come on, Mr Knight, let’s hop in that wonder car of yours and burn rubber or we’re going to be late!’ Michael offered Joanna an apologetic little shrug as he jogged out of the door.

‘He’d be intellectually attractive if he weren’t so . . . so damned obnoxious!’ declared Joanna.

‘I know what you mean – he says the same thing about you,’ Michael said on the threshold of the door. ‘*Ciao*. See you at seven-thirty.’

He left her to ponder his last remark. David Dalton attracted to her, despite his running line of hatred for her lifestyle? Now that was . . .

Joanna snapped to her senses. Now that, she thought, was *ridiculous*.

'I want to show you where the warehouse-bound trucks come from on the LA end,' said David once they were in the car. 'We've got to head east a bit, into the sticks. I'll tell you where to turn.'

They stopped near what appeared to be an abandoned cement plant near the edge of the desert, cradled in a small valley, surrounded by rolling hills.

'Another part of Matthews' construction firm?'

'You got it,' said David. 'We're going to have to ditch the car.'

He left KITT on SURVEILLANCE mode. KITT would alert them via Michael's comlink if anything untoward occurred while they were separated.

They ran low across the open space, coming up for air when they reached the first hangar-like warehouse of a cluster.

'Two nights ago,' said David, 'I saw a whole caravan of dumptrucks leave here, empty. They returned six hours later, full. In the middle of the night. That's unusual, but not totally strange. What is weird is that Matthews doesn't have a building job anywhere in the state right now – certainly nothing that would require the kind of heavy transport action I saw.'

'Are you good with locks?' said Michael, eyeing the padlock hasped across the warehouse door.

'The best. Just give me a minute.'

Michael stood sentry while David tickled the lock open. In about ninety seconds they were inside.

'Crates,' whispered Michael. 'On pallets. Identical to what I found in the truck last night.'

'Shall we?'

'Let's.' He motioned for David to kick the nearest crate, which he did. The lid jumped up, exposing the nails, and they both pried it open.

'More phoney pots?' Michael wondered aloud. They swept aside the heavy padding.

Then they both whistled in slow surprise. David said, 'I'll be *damned* . . .'

'Stiletto,' said Michael, amazed.

'What?' David looked from Michael to the red enamelled nose of the missile they had just uncovered. The lethal-looking thing was about seven feet long, and as big around as a three-pound-size coffee can.

'Stiletto – Defence Department jargon for the STIL-stroke-30 laser-targeted missile system. Its virtue is adaptability – it can be used as a surface-to-surface target missile, it can be mounted on jets, or fired in clusters from a conventional rocket launcher. A nasty little

item, to be sure.'

'So much for the stolen Defence Department information O'Brien bought,' David nodded.

'That's assuming all these crates hold the same thing.' The warehouse was loaded.

'How powerful are these things?'

'They'll take out an M-90 tank at close range. With three of them you could knock down the average shopping mall.'

David looked around, nervous now. 'How come Matthews doesn't have any guards on this stuff?'

'Seems like an oversight, doesn't it? Personally, I think we took care of the guards this morning. It wouldn't do to involve too many people in an operation like this, would it?'

He chewed on that for a moment. 'Yeah. And this place is in the middle of the desert—damn small chance of somebody just stumbling over these, through a locked door.'

'A lot of guards would draw the attention of the authorities,' added Michael, just as his comlink beeped. He pressed a tiny button and held it near his face. 'KITT?'

*'Michael, there is a truck approaching your position from the south-southwest, using the desert road.'*

'Let's pull back this time, slick,' said Michael. 'No combat – I don't even want them to know we were in here.'

'Why not?' said David, now itching for a fight.

'Because I'm very interested in finding out where this stuff goes from here.' They were back at the door, having replaced the lid on the crate to look normal and untampered with. Michael cracked the door and peeked out. The truck had gone to the front of the warehouse. 'All clear.' He tapped David on the shoulder and together they hightailed it back to the roadside brush where KITT was concealed.

'Not bad as a watchdog, KITT,' David said as he climbed in.

*'I try to be good at whatever I do,'* said KITT.

'Same here.'

'KITT, give me a visual on the warehouse doors – close on the truck,' said Michael.

Both men watched as the expected picture of one of the military cargo trucks zoomed up on the number two screen and focused.

'I like this,' said David. 'Kind of like remote-controlled cat burglary. Or voyeurism. What happens if they see us?'

'They can shoot all they want, but unless they haul out one of those Stilettos and ram it



up KITT's tailpipe, they can't touch us.'

*'Undesirable action and uncomfortable imagery at best,'* said KITT.

'Bulletproof car? Won't do you much good against one of those teflon slugs they developed. Those things penetrate five Kevlar mesh riot vests in a row without even slowing down. Army's not supposed to be using them anymore but they are.'

'It's a little more than bulletproof. There's a new alloy molecularly bonded to the car in a one hundred per cent envelope.' Michael decided to skip around the details. 'Plus the microprocessor, a hydrogen fuel system, other . . . uh, features.'

David's attention was mostly on the screen anyway. 'Here come the crates.'

'At least one of those, the long one – see? Those are the Stilettos. God knows what else there is inside the shorter ones.'

'Looks like they're taking a whole truckload.'

'KITT, can you give me the plates on the truck?'

*'Sorry, Michael. Out of range; wrong angle for scanning.'*

'I'm going to follow them – this time without riding in the back of the truck,' he said.

David looked at Michael quizzically. 'But what about your little social appointment this evening?'

Michael grinned enigmatically.

Back at her suite in the Miramar, Joanna was putting the finishing touches on herself for the evening. She donned a dramatic pair of hammered silver drop earrings and a triple-strand, full braid, herringbone-weave collar, also of sterling silver. She wore a single ring, a Princess design with half-carat diamonds surrounding a marquise sapphire, which Arthur had given her in Monaco – it was like putting on psychic armour, and it made her feel confident. Her heels elevated her into a more Scandanavian stance and helped emphasise her calves – she had good legs, she knew it, and tonight she would show them off; the gown was slit in all the right places. It did not allow for hidden supports or fakery of any kind; everything beneath the filmy silk of the gown was a hundred percent Joanna. She rarely used scents, but tonight she employed a dab or two of Lotus – behind the ears, on the nape of the neck, between the breasts. She had the perfume specially manufactured; it was not a commercial product, and she had named it herself. The deep blue of the gown made her hair seem brilliantly blonde, as if radiating light, and darkened her blue-grey eyes to the stormy colour of thunderclouds.

She was ready.

The digital clock on the dresser had just silently flipped its number panels to 7.30 pm precisely when there was a curt knock on the door of the suite. Joanna hurried across the living room, gown swishing grandly.

‘Michael!’ she said delightedly as she opened the door. Men who were prompt were so rare. ‘You’re right on time, much to my – ’

Her mouth stalled in the open mode when she saw David Dalton standing on her threshold. David Dalton . . . *alone*. David Dalton . . . dressed in a rumpled corduroy sports jacket, stiff Levis and a dark blue shirt. A maroon knit tie hung around his neck like a dead snake, knot loosened. ‘Michael had to take a rain check,’ he said, as though nothing in the universe was wrong. ‘So I’m your date for tonight.’ He gave her his funny little shrug.

Joanna did not know whether to start screaming or just simply lapse into shock and have David call the paramedics. ‘Oh, God,’ she mumbled, completely at sea. ‘This is impossible. This isn’t fair. I’m gonna kill Michael Knight. I’m gonna sue the Foundation . . . I’ll . . . what the devil am I gonna do *now*?’

‘Hey, don’t start crying or anything, okay?’ David moved into the living room and shut the door while Joanna was marching in tight circles, wondering if there was some way out.

Finally she stopped, turned to him with her steely gaze and said, ‘take off your clothes.’

‘I’m not quite sure I know what you – ’

‘Take off your clothes, *now* !’

He smiled gamely at her, confused. ‘You first.’

‘That’s not what I mean, you idiot! Go take a shower while I call the valet and try to get you some decent threads. Now! Jump!’ She glanced at the clock again. 7.32. She moaned.

Still stunned, he said, ‘Decent clothes? You mean like that lovely little nothing you’re almost wearing?’

She smiled an evil schoolteacher smile and spoke distinctly, as though David was severely retarded. ‘The party is black tie, David, you . . . you *nincompoop*!’

He shrugged again. At least he hadn’t worn his fighting suit. ‘I didn’t think black tie would go with my Adidas,’ he said.

Joanna made a strangling noise, pointed imperiously toward the bathroom, stamped one foot, then picked up the phone and called the valet. She told him it was an emergency.

KITT killed all running lights. They tailed the five-ton truck from the warehouse at a discreet distance of two miles, fixing position and progress by way of radar and map projections,

since there had been no opportunity for Michael to plant a homing device on the truck. KITT's computers accurately charted the course of the deadly ordnance from the warehouse.

The sleek black racer moved silently along on AUTO CRUISE. The readout lights in the cabin had been dimmed down for coverage; Michael's eyes were on the glowing green map projection. The truck was represented as a green circle with crosshairs. KITT's own position was a red circle.

*'Michael, government accessed files indicate that the Stiletto missile system definitely has the capacity to . . . to not only pierce my molecular coat, but destroy me all together.'*

'Don't sweat it, old buddy,' said Michael. 'As far as we know, they have the rockets but not the launcher.'

*'Yet.'*

'Well, let's make a point of not getting perforated by a Stiletto just to find out what it feels like, okay?'

*'Affirmative. Enthusiastically.'*

'Where are we? I can't see anything.' It was totally dark outside.

*'Between Redlands and Oro Grande,'* responded KITT, automatically displaying a map and fixing their position on the number two screen while the truck's progress continued on the number one.

'We're back in the Mojave Desert, pal.' About a trillion stars were visible in the night air.

They tailed the truck without incident for another half an hour, keeping their distance. Michael dozed off in the pilot couch. When he awoke, KITT had stopped at the crest of a hill.

*'Michael? The truck has ceased progress and is signalling.'*

'Let's see it on infra-red.'

The screen showed the glowing head of the truck motor, the friction track on the tyres, the body warmth of the driver and his passenger, and the spotlight flares of the headlights blinking twice. The signal was answered from the other side of the valley. Two blinks, then three. The truck responded with a single blink and then gunned its engine.

'Slow and easy,' said Michael. 'What are they signalling at?'

*'It appears from my readings to be a tractor-trailer semi-parked three quarters of a mile down, on the shoulder of the road.'*

'Another rendezvous. Matthews sure is making this as complicated as possible.'

*'Possibly extra caution, once he received the news that you had put several of his sentries out of commission.'*

‘It’s a good thing none of them can give a positive ID on David,’ noted Michael. Perhaps it was a good idea he had not gone to the party. Matthews’ operatives – even though they were supposedly in jail – had seen his face, not David’s. That nifty little Ninja mask had hidden a multitude of potential sins.

*‘They’ve married up,’* announced KITT.

Michael smiled. The microprocessor was beginning to use slang terms, much to the dismay of Devon Miles. It had picked most of its jargon up from Michael, courtesy of the personality-reactive program Devon had designed, had in fact insisted on for the Knight Industries Two Thousand. What dear old Devon hadn’t counted on, he mused, was Wilton Knight’s eventual choice for the car’s pilot. ‘Okay. Stop here and give me max magnification on video. Let’s see what they’re up to. Use infra-red on screen one, the Nitefinder lens on screen two.’

Simultaneously, the red and green outlines sprang forth on the monitor screens.

*‘They’re transferring the rockets to the semi, it appears,’* reported KITT.

‘But why? The five-ton’s big enough to carry that stuff. Let’s have an X-ray scan of the semi; find out what else there is.’

The trailer box appeared in orthographic-projection. Some heavy device was blocking the open end; the men were moving the crates around it and stacking them in the forward section of the trailer.

‘Could be anything,’ Michael said. ‘It’s the general shape of an ack-ack gun—you know, one of those big destroyer rigs that a guy sits inside? KITT, pull the government specs on the Stiletto launching system. See if the blueprints match the shape in the back of the truck.’

The Stiletto blueprint winked on. It resembled an enormous, multi-barrelled Gatling Gun with a saddle for an operator. Eight ten-foot long discharge tubes held rockets mounted on a revolving drum. A second operator could reload the tubes continuously when they reached the bottom of the arc. For all practical purposes, the Stiletto system never had to stop to reload; it could just keep firing and firing until the rocket supply ran out.

The diagram shrank until it was on an architectural scale equivalent with the dimensions of the truck, and then superimposed. The two outlines, yellow and green, fitted together like a glove, making a single blue outline.

‘Bingo,’ said Michael. ‘So much for having a launcher. That must be the reason why O’Brien decided to kill everyone connected with the theft of the Defence Department papers – for him, getting the rockets was easy. And since there’ve been no reports of stolen rocket

launchers, we have to assume that O'Brien bought the plans, and, using Matthews' construction connections and cover, built a launcher for himself from scratch. I wonder if he's tested it yet?

*'If it's all the same to you, Michael, I'd rather not be around when he does test it.'*

'That might be what this little meeting tonight is all about.' Michael thought about it, then shook his head. 'No. Both O'Brien and Matthews are at the party. They'd be around for a practical test – that means the truck has yet another destination.'

*'I hope you brought your medicinal dexedrine,'* said KITT helpfully.

'I'm not gonna fall asleep, old buddy. But I wonder what David and Joanna are up to right about now?'

The trucks growled to life, and Michael, wearily, prepared to keep following them.

## Chapter 6

‘Don’t take this personally or anything,’ said David from his seat in the limousine, ‘but you really look ravishing in that get-up.’

Joanna smiled demurely. Her legs were crossed and extended out into the vast expanse of carpet that separated them from the sliding chauffeur’s window. He was looking at her approvingly; she returned the compliment and examined the fit of his tuxedo. ‘Not bad for a rush job,’ she said. ‘At least there aren’t any rental tags hanging out.’

David squirmed. ‘I’ll bet they developed these things during the Spanish Inquisition. The rack, the boot, the thumbscrews . . . and the tux.’

They were coming up on the Pacific Ocean in all its nighttime splendour. At least thirty limousines were parked like luxury carriages side-by-side in a cul-de-sac fronting an enormous stretch of privately owned beachfront property. Next to them were quite a few Mercedes and Porsches, a Rolls Royce Silver Corniche, a smattering of cockroach-like Maseratis, an expensively restored muscle car or two – Mustangs and Camaros from the 1960s, mostly – and a full stretch Corsair limo that took up three parking slots, could seat eleven people, and had a chauffeur standing by like a guard dog.

‘I feel kind of funny,’ said Joanna, ‘waltzing in there in all my splendour to confront the people who murdered my husband. I don’t even have a plan.’

‘You’re not supposed to have a plan,’ said David. ‘Be spontaneous. Be yourself. Circulate, make charming conversation, and knock everybody’s eyeballs out. You did say that Matthews was moving into this place?’

‘Priscilla Ragsdale said on the phone that he’d taken an option on it. He’s already moved in. He’s paying a fortune for the place, so the Ragsdales are footing the catering bill for the party. They can certainly afford it.’

‘If Matthews is moved in, then maybe I’ll have another chance at the information I missed out on O’Brien’s yacht. So, what I want you to do is cover for me if I vanish for any length of time.’

‘You’re wasting a valuable resource,’ she sulked. ‘Me.’

‘Just this once. Correct me if I commit a *faux pas*.’

‘David?’

‘Yeah?’ He was becoming jumpy with anticipation. He much preferred the midnight infiltration to the elegant cat burglar routine.

She seemed about to say something emotional, then caught herself. ‘Oh, I don’t know . . . good luck.’

‘Thanks, Joanna. I think we’ve arrived.’

A liveried servant bade them step from the limo, and checked Joanna’s engraved invitation. ‘Just do whatever the “right” people do at these little soirées,’ David encouraged her.

He stepped from the car ahead of Joanna, who flushed with embarrassment. She had to trot to catch up with him before he made it to the door. ‘Hold it,’ she commanded. ‘Your manners are showing. Ladies first. And take my arm.’

‘What?’

‘Take my *arm*,’ she said, grabbing his like a robot’s limb and bending it into the proper pose. ‘You’re escorting me, remember?’

They made it through the front door. ‘So far so good,’ David breathed. It was clear the opulence of the place, and the sheer level of conspicuous consumption, made him nervous.

Three buffet tables groaned beneath a staggering weight of food – hors d’oeuvres of every type, crabmeat cocktails, a shrimp platter the size of a garbage can lid, five kinds of fondue, canapes, caviar, tortes and chocolate mousse, Danish ham slices, twenty varieties of cheese, an equal number of types of crackers to put it all on, fried zucchini, artichoke hearts, pearl onions, smoked sausage, nachos, chips, dips, sweetbreads, fresh pineapple chopped from a huge bomb-shaped fruit, seedless grapes on ice, breadsticks and fresh unsalted butter, still-warm datenut bread, savoury chicken and teriyaki beef on skewers, sushi, sashimi, hot vegetable tempura, salmon butteryaki, clam stuffing, fresh oysters, onion rings, potato skins, kiwi fruit in thin, cold slices, brandied pears, carrot sticks in brown sugar glaze, spinach salad dressed with sizzling bacon, rumaki, ten flavours of Italian ices, real *pommes frites* sprinkled with Parmesan cheese, warm bite-sized slices of veal, shark, sweet-and-sour duck, and swordfish, soft pretzels, garnished celery sticks, samosa bread and . . .

‘English butter cookies,’ said David, pointing.

Joanna pointed, too, but not blatantly, and not with her fingers. ‘The Ragsdales.’

He followed her gaze across the room, past little knots of talkers and people putting the

make on each other, of Hollywood types hustling and deal-making, of ageing squares trying to coerce hungry starlets into a moonlight walk or whatever, of people desperate to be seen in the socially correct clique—or people desperate to be seen at all—of self-important misers talking importantly of money, of *nouveau riche* boors being loud and abrasive, of happily insensate party animals, of fat people pretending they were slim, or stupid people pretending they were intelligent, of people working the crowd, and of people seeking jobs among the crowd. Everyone was here – the beautiful and the spiritually bankrupt, the wealthy and the peons on whose backs they had ascended to wealth, the movers and shakers and their shakees, the sex symbols and the sex-starved. The whole pageant made David's stomach bubble.

Joanna was pointing at a couple strategically poised in front of a fireplace big enough to roast a Honda Civic. A few centuries back, David thought, that area of the room was where the thrones would have sat. The couple standing there did not circulate – they waited for people to come to them, to approach and be granted favours. John Ragsdale had made his pile in California real estate, and looked like a university president, studious, stern, political, with iron-grey hair and military posture. His tailored European tux fitted too perfectly, making him look a bit like a mannequin. The grey hair turned white at the temples in such a perfect line that it looked spray-painted.

Priscilla Ragsdale was like an old but well-tended garden, attractive, but too consciously 'dressed young', her skin wrinkle-free, but taut and shiny from repeated cosmetic surgery. She was a wily old fox who lived well and enjoyed it, but was sometimes too desperate to be accepted, and it drove her to occasional artificiality. Her eyes were constantly on the make, and she was a bit anorexic from forced dieting. She had fine facial bones and a certain amount of true class and charm that showed through whenever she was not struggling to be hip or sexy.

'Are you ready for the Ragsdales?' Joanna whispered, not without some amusement.

'Hm. Are the Ragsdales ready for me?' David squared his shoulders. He really looked quite good in the tuxedo. 'John and Prissy – uh, Priscilla, right?'

She nodded. 'Here we go. Look affluent.'

Together they glided across the main room of the huge beach house, drawing a few envious stares. Privately, David revelled in being seen with the smashing Joanna on his arm. When they reached the fireplace, he stood by and waited for his cue.

'Priscilla . . . John . . . how nice to see you again!'



With a tight smile, John Ragsdale allowed himself to be embraced. Prissy flung herself into Joanna's arms and they kissed like sorority sisters while John gave David the once-over. When he noticed David's warrior braid sticking out over the collar of his tux, he frowned. Then Priscilla's eyes were on him, bright and expectant.

'This is Mr David Dalton.'

Prissy's eyes gobbled David up whole. John noticed, and his frown deepened. His handshake was business-like and cordial. Prissy took David's hand in both of hers and almost forgot to let go.

'It's wonderful to see you, Joanna – you're looking so radiant! How long will you be in Los Angeles?' Prissy smiled and nodded at David between gasping sentences; she sounded like a 55-year-old breathless schoolgirl on speed.

'I don't really know,' Joanna said dreamily. 'It depends on rather a lot of different things.'

Prissy took this to mean David, and grinned evilly. John, on the other hand, seemed to control his breathing near David, as though the younger man had brought some strain of infectious disease into the room.

In a slow wave beginning at the kitchen's swinging doors, applause broke out amid the crowd as a towering, four-tier birthday cake was wheeled out on a trolley. At first all David and Joanna could see was the single red candle adorning the cake's top tier; it looked like a little stick of dynamite with a lit fuse. Then the full, gargantuan bulk of the blue and white cake rolled into view. It was a complicated baker's nightmare, perfectly realised. The crowd parted to let the cake through into the exact centre of the room.

As the people milled about and re-congregated, David spotted Eduardo O'Brien.

He was dressed in a bronze-coloured suit with an open-throated yellow shirt and the usual decorations of purest gold dangling and shining. The golden flecks in his eyes glittered expectantly. Tonight he was also wearing a gold stud earring in his left ear; it looked like a rivet welded to his golden-bronzed earlobe. Flanking him were Elton Matthews, stuffed into his tux like a tired banker at some fund-raising smoker, and Tiara D'Arcy. Her flowing ebony hair shone like polished wood, and her wide, bright-green eyes blazed. She attended O'Brien in a very skimpy evening gown of satin lace, raising the temperatures of almost every male in the room. She looked like the most expensive plaything in the world.

David noticed that O'Brien had a ceremonial Samurai katana tucked under one arm. All eyes were on the golden man, the notorious half-breed.

'Stand back,' said O'Brien softly, in what David fancied was a golden voice. 'Make room.'

The group obliged the honoured guest. While David's back was turned to observe the goings-on, John Ragsdale let his wife see the disapproval of David on his face.

She poked him. 'Oh, Johnny my dear, why don't you stop being so bloody Victorian? What's Joanna supposed to do? Mourn for a year? Wear black twenty-four hours a day? Or just dry up and blow away? She's young and attractive. Young and attractive women require . . . attention. Caring. Or they *will* dry up and blow away.'

'Arthur hasn't even been dead a week yet, Prissy,' John whispered back, harshly.

'Don't be such an old fuddy,' she admonished him. To her, what Joanna seemed to have accomplished in six days was impressive.

'It has been said . . .' said O'Brien, loudly, to secure the attention of all present, then more softly as he became the focus of the crowd, 'that a man's wealth is determined by the number of friends he possesses. Frankly, I prefer cash in the bank.'

Everyone laughed politely, but David was thinking, 'that's you in a nutshell, you heartless butcher'. This grinning, ambulatory gold mine was the creature who had diced an ex-Defence Department worker into bite-sized hunks, and had skinned another man alive. And here he was, right now, with another blade in his hand, making all his jaded guests laugh.

O'Brien turned his back on the four-foot high cake, standing in the circle the group had cleared for him. Matthews watched with disinterest, already aware of the programme, while Tiara observed with hungry eyes. 'I wish to thank you all for joining me here, in the new home of my good friend, Elton Matthews, on this most special day.' Then, with an unexpected shriek, he whipped around, tearing the samurai sword free of its wooden scabbard. The gleaming silver blade flashed up and down in precise, blurred motions too quick to see, each accompanied by a guttural grunt. Not a few of the people in the audience gasped in surprise.

The cake trembled on the trolley but did not fall over, its top two tiers now divided into more or less perfect wedges by the slicing action of the blade. As a finishing touch, O'Brien slashed sideways with the katana, lifting the piece bearing the still-lit candle free, and passing it slowly over to the waiting hands of Tiara, who collected a dollop of white frosting on one finger and popped it into her moist mouth.

'Thank you, ladies and gentlemen,' O'Brien said to general applause. His eyes drifted across the crowd, passed over Joanna, then returned quickly for a better look. Tiara glanced up from her piece of cake, saw David standing looking at her, then hesitated before puffing out the candle flame. She looked again, and squinted as though she vaguely recognised him.

Joanna acknowledged O'Brien's frank stare and turned back to David. 'Would you like some champagne? I'm sure the bar is as overstocked as the buffet table.'

'Thanks, but I don't drink alcohol,' he smiled. 'Besides, I should be offering to get some for you, instead of the other way around.'

She considered the birthday cake. 'That was pretty spectacular.'

'O'Brien's a showoff – you don't *do* that sort of thing with a katana. It's like . . . like using an Academy Award as a doorstep, or playing tiddlywinks with the Medal of Honour.'

'You take that Oriental stuff seriously, don't you?'

He looked in her blue-grey eyes for the joke, and found none. She was not ridiculing him. 'Right. I guess I do. Someday I'll tell you a little about it.'

'Well, that's a start, anyway. Now, how about that champagne? I could sure use some.'

'They're coming over this way,' he said. 'Just relax.'

'You mean, "you'll handle it"? ' Now there was derision in her tone. 'Give me a break, Dalton.' Without a pause, she stepped forward and extended her hand toward Elton Matthews. 'You must be the host of this *fabulous* party,' she said, gushing just enough to verify the mental cliché David had of what rich folks did at rich parties.

Matthews, well trained in social graces by necessity, accepted her hand and bowed slightly. 'Elton Matthews. I'm delighted to meet you, Miss – ?'

'St John,' she nodded, searching his eyes for a reaction to her name. There was none. 'Joanna St John. You know, I've been noticing the splendid pre-Columbian pieces mounted on some of the walls. They really are exquisite. Did you get them through an art broker, or did you travel through South America collecting them yourself?'

During the entire time she spoke, she did not look once at O'Brien. David suddenly realised what was going on. She was forcing O'Brien to interject himself into the discussion by ignoring him. O'Brien's massive ego would not permit him to believe a beautiful woman could successfully ignore him. Meanwhile, she asked Matthews the sort of questions designed to stroke his own self-image – that is, the suggestion that he had actually hand-selected the artwork in the room himself, rather than merely paying money for it – while making the men do all the talking.

Plus which, David noticed, he had ceased to exist in her periphery of attention. Oh, but Joanna was a grand master at *this* sort of game!

O'Brien deliberately stepped between Matthews and Joanna, asking, 'Are you a collector, Miss St John? I helped Elton acquire the pieces you see here before you.' He smiled

expansively; David could see the gold edging the man's front teeth. Matthews took the interjection as a signal to leave, and he did so, like a trained seal. His 'equal partnership' with O'Brien seemed to be more and more an illusion . . . at least when it came to competition for the attention of women.

Joanna surprised David by returning O'Brien's notice not with her standard cool reserve, but with a full-wattage bedroom smile. She stepped forward and linked arms with the killer. As they turned to tour the room, O'Brien handed David his empty champagne glass, as though the young man in the tuxedo were nothing more than a servant. David's blood boiled, even though he knew O'Brien's supposed conquest was a fake engineered by Joanna. He batted down the urge to lash out with a pivot kick and drive those gold teeth back into O'Brien's spinal column, ending his miserable existence right here and now.

Tiara was looking at him, and he read her message clearly. She had not only been abandoned by O'Brien, who casually took her for granted . . . but he abandoned her with regularity. He did this all the time to her. She seemed to want to say something to him, but before he could divine her intent, she hurried out of the room. He was not sure whether to pursue her, so he did nothing.

When he turned around he found himself nose-to-nose with Priscilla Ragsdale.

'You and Joanna make quite a striking couple,' she said, with a trace of irony borne of the fact that Joanna had just strolled away with the guest of honour. 'Have you two known each other long?'

'Not really,' he said. 'We used to play racquetball at the same club. Sometimes it only seems as if I've known her for a few hours.'

'That little braid of hair is very sexy; I like it. Is it Joanna's idea?' She moved closer, perhaps just to avoid the crunch of the crowd.

'No.' He couldn't think of anything else to say, nor did he wish to attempt to explain, to someone as shallow as Prissy Ragsdale, the exact significance of the warrior braid. To tell her it was his personal Medal of Honour, his private Academy Award for the disciplines and training and years of study he had undergone, would be to say nothing.

'I think it makes you look virile,' she said. 'It takes a lot of testosterone to give a man the self-confidence to wear his hair the way he wants.'

David laughed. 'Really, it has nothing to do with -'

It did not matter to Prissy. She leaned closer - he could smell the dry *brut* champagne on her breath - and said, 'Just between you and me, Dave, I'd braid Johnny's hair if I thought it

would get *him* a little hormone power!’ Then she giggled. David rather liked Prissy Ragsdale, actually. She was an honest, although odd combination of a small child, a matron, and a wanton woman.

‘Prissy, can I ask you a personal question?’ Joanna and O’Brien had melted into the throng, and David realised his chance was at hand.

‘Why sure, hon. Fire away.’

‘Where’s the men’s room?’

‘Oh. Um, let’s see . . . this is the Broadwood house . . . oh yes – up those stairs over there.’ She pointed. ‘Go right, then right again. It’s the room with the toilet in it.’ She giggled again.

‘Thanks,’ he said, eyeing the stairs. ‘I’ll be right back.’

He decided not to be mad with Joanna – she was simply creating for him the type of opportunity he wanted. She had no more real romantic interest in the unctuous Eduardo O’Brien than he, David, had in consuming the high-caloric gunk spilling off the buffet table.

He cut through the crowd and padded up the stairs, following Priscilla’s directions until he found himself in the east end of a long corridor-type hallway, open to another staircase at the west end. The bedroom and office doors were all closed . . . and there was a burly sentry standing with his arms locked behind his back before the second door down. That would be Matthews’ new office.

David wandered down the corridor, pretending to be lost and slightly tipsy. He grinned vacuously at the guard. ‘Ah – bathroom?’ he said, pointing exaggeratedly at the office door.

In a voice as raspy as a nail file the big ape answered, ‘What you want is right over there, friend,’ he pointed. David could see the bulge of a heavy-calibre automatic beneath the man’s left armpit. When guys like this talked, their hands automatically drifted closer to their guns. The guard’s moved from his side to the centre button of his jacket. David noted from the man’s pupils that he was primed up on some kind of amphetemine – hair-triggered, ready to blow away anything that looked the tiniest bit suspicious without even thinking about it. This was not an idiot like the guards he and Michael had done away with in the warehouse. This was the first string, the serious killer, which meant David was close to something critical. Getting behind the door became even more imperative.

He wanted to pat the guard on the shoulder, buddy-buddy, to reinforce his clever-drunk dodge, but he was afraid the man might explode, so he merely smiled and made his way to the bathroom. There were two upstairs bathrooms, discreetly labelled for the partygoers this night.

Once inside, he locked the door. There was an aluminium frame sliding window offering a space barely large enough for him to squeeze through. It would have to suffice.

He kicked off his tight, uncomfortable dress shoes and shucked the tuxedo coat. He yanked out his shirt and loosened up his clothing in whatever way he could, then cranked on the sink faucets to cover any noise he might make going out the window.

He looked down. Nothing but a back patio surrounded by a redwood fence. Moving van boxes, bicycles, a brick barbecue. Light and noise from the party spilled out through sliding glass doors.

He looked up. The roof was steep, but thick-shingled and manageable to his bare feet. It was just out of reach; about a foot further than the length of his body could carry him.

He hefted himself onto the windowsill – as he had done a day or so earlier, escaping from Joanna’s motel room at the Royal Palms, David did a three count and then leapt straight up. He hung in space for a stomach-wrenching split second, then his fingers grasped the sheer edge of the roof.

His feet dangled free, out of reach of the bathroom sill. He hung still an additional second to stabilise, then hauled himself straight up, doubling his arms, making his biceps bulge out. Now his chin was level with the lip of the roof, and he experienced a flash of mountaineering terror when he saw just how steeply canted the A-shaped roof really was. He meditated the fear away quickly; to let it engulf him would ensure a fast fall and a broken finish on the flagstones of the patio.

*Calm. Calm. You’re surrounded by water. Be placid, be calm.*

He opened his eyes. Now there was nothing but the objective of the roof. Slowly he began to swing himself side-to-side, until he mustered enough pendulum momentum to kick up, and catch the edge of the roof with his right heel.

*The human body has four points – the hands and the feet. As the majority of bodily points go, so goes the centre of the body. You now have three points in contact with the roof.*

He defeated the roof first in his mind. After that, doing it with his body was comparatively simple. He pulled in his foot, then rolled sideways onto the sloping surface, now pressing against the roof edge instead of hanging off it. When his back made contact with the shingles, he quickly spreadeagled himself, to maximize bodily contact with the surface to keep from sliding off. Then, crablike, he edged his way toward the summit until he had spared enough area to safely work his way to a standing position. Once on his feet, despite the radical slope of the roof, he quickly scampered to the top and over.

He thought that explaining how he had done it to Priscilla Ragsdale would be an exercise in futility.

He went to his knees and crawled down to the edge of the roof on the opposite side, experiencing none of the plunging sensation that should have been imparted by the height and the angle. He was facing down, the edge within inches, his butt higher than his head . . . but he was not afraid. The office, he knew, was straight across the hall from the bathroom, the door offset a little to the right. He had crossed the roof in an equally straight line, and should now, therefore, be directly above the office.

When he peered over the edge he felt the gods were really with him. Right below was a broad, redwood-plank balcony, facing the ocean.

He dropped with cat-like silence.

The curtains were open. No one was inside the office. In the centre of a complicated desk unit, a computer terminal sat, its monitor screen glowing green in the READY mode.

David easily slipped the sliding door latch with another of his metal-plate tools, and was inside in seconds.

He pulled back a flap of carpeting beneath the desk. Another safe. So far, so good.

He had just pulled open the top drawer of the desk – finding a distressingly mundane array of office rickrack – when the terminal suddenly clicked into electronic life.

He watched for a second as the clearance codes were automatically run through.

★★★ DATA TRANSMISSION

★★★ 13 JULY

code: L3-B4-D

subject: MATERIAL INVENTORY

ADJUSTMENT

file: BOCA

As in *Boca Culebra*, David thought. He found the dot-matrix printer, and tapped in instructions for everything to be run out on paper simultaneously with its playout on the screen. The printer buzzed quietly.

★★★ MESSAGE FOLLOWS

as

please update transport shipments itinerary to accommodate additions as follows –

- M-19BH 540 units
- AMR-10 330 units
- STIL/30 500 units

the following files have been accessed and are ready for transfer –

File JSF-DD-7396 code FIREKILL

File JD-DD-11372 code RAZORTEETH

File CBW-DD-0007 code RIPPER subcode BIODEATH

File NCJ-DD-41283 code MOONBLAST

David knew Michael would be interested in this information; perhaps he could explain more of the cryptic codes and annotations. He knew what CBW was – chemical-biological warfare – and what the code biodeath implied. STIL/30 had to be the Stiletto missile system – apparently there were five hundred of the things sitting in a warehouse somewhere . . . and Matthews' computer knew where. The other codes were sinister-sounding enough to worry anybody.

The printout finished, David tore it carefully – quietly – free along the perforations in the paper and folded it, stuffing it into his pants pocket.

No combination, this time. Perhaps he had just gained something more valuable.

In ten more seconds he was out the door, and vaulting back onto the roof.



# Chapter 7

O'Brien led Joanna out onto another of the beach house's five porch-balconies, also facing the ocean. They just missed, by seconds, the sight of David Dalton leaping from the second storey balcony above them, to the roof where he vanished into the night.

Joanna was fighting hard not to meet Eduardo O'Brien's mesmerising gaze; it was too much like eye contact with a bushmaster or a cobra. His gold eyes glinted in the dark; it was easy to imagine them with vertically slit pupils. This was the creature that had murdered Arthur, would kill David and Michael at a moment's notice, would kill *her* if he got the slightest inkling what she was up to.

'Mr Matthews has got himself an extremely opulent new home,' she said, gazing at the sea.

'You are the perfect complement to opulent surroundings,' O'Brien recited, laying it on thick.

She moved her arm away from his grasp. He followed her. Was it Latin men who had the thing about body contact? Italians? Weren't Italians Latins, technically? If she just dealt with O'Brien as another lecherous male, she'd do okay, she thought.

She tried not to ignore his pointed compliment. 'I'd say that the young lady you were with deserves the same praise. She's lovely ...'

'Ah, Tiara, yes,' mused O'Brien. 'She is beautiful. And agreeable. And expensive. But she is much like that champagne in there – perfect for parties and social trifles. An ornament. You, on the other hand –' His hand closed around hers again '– are like fine old Amontillado, a wine of substance, of experience, of subtle taste.'

What a truckload, she thought. David Dalton was a prince by comparison. She tried not to wonder what had become of him as she gently extricated herself from O'Brien's grasp a second time. She smiled at him to ease the sting of withdrawal.

'She is ice,' he whispered. 'You are fire.'

The gold edging on his teeth gleamed in the moonlight. Joanna felt vaguely ill. Being the

sort of man used to conquering women rather than winning their trust, he could buy a thousand women like Tiara, billboard-perfect specimens all. Therefore he always wanted what he could not have – that is, women who could not be bought, and he had perceived Joanna as just such a woman.

‘I saw the way you watched me cut the cake. When a man wields a deadly blade, women are compelled to be near him, to feel his strength, to draw from his power, is this not so?’

‘I can’t imagine how a man as powerful as you would ever be without anything he wanted,’ she said carefully. Where the hell was David?

‘I rarely am, Joanna.’ He loomed behind her. ‘When I see something, I pursue it, I run it to earth, I make it *mine*.’ His hand clasped around her forearm, and she could feel his breath on the side of her neck.

She broke from him gracefully, knowing that it would only fan his flames higher. ‘Shall we go back inside?’

He nodded, a courtly sort of gesture. ‘If you wish. I’m reluctant to share your charming company with even one more person . . . but perhaps you’ll consent to be my guest sometime? Under less crowded and chaotic circumstances?’

She smiled. ‘Perhaps I would.’

As she led him back inside, neither of them noticed Tiara, watching them from just inside the sliding glass door.

When O’Brien and Joanna re-entered the room, two large men in tight black suits moved quickly toward him. The expression in O’Brien’s eyes was one of recognition. Joanna hovered close enough to overhear their exchange.

‘Temple set off the beeper alarm,’ one of the men whispered to O’Brien. ‘Upstairs.’

‘What was it?’

‘Matthews has the office door key, so we’re not sure. He probably heard a noise in the office.’

‘Temple probably heard a fly land on the door,’ said the second man. ‘He’s so revved up he’d start shooting at dust motes if you surprised him.’

‘I like him that way,’ said O’Brien. ‘It keeps him alert. Verify the presence of everyone on the guest list. Do it this second.’

‘Yes, sir,’ both men said.

David was still nowhere to be seen. Joanna did the only thing she could think of on the spur of the moment, but it was composed of several very clearly considered chains of action

and reaction. O'Brien desired very much to be in her good graces. David needed to be warned – somehow. And the investigation of the guards had to be delayed, if only for crucial seconds.

So, as the guards turned to leave, she gracefully turned with them and shoved a waiter into their path. A tray laden with full champagne glasses flew sideways, and Joanna fell into the dogpile of waiter and guards while screaming, 'Eduardo!' in a panicked voice.

The party stopped dead to gawk at the spectacle.

The waiter spun as he fell, so Joanna caught most of the bubbly payload of the tray. She and the guards were drenched. O'Brien, of course, rushed to help her.

'You idiots!' he roared. 'This woman is a guest of mine!' As he helped her to her feet, she managed to accidentally plant a spike heel in the back of one of the guard's outstretched hands. As he howled with pain, she said, 'Keep your paws off me, you goon!' In her mind she meant the remark as much for O'Brien as the guard.

'Are you all right?'

She acted suitably dazed. 'Yes, I – when the guard turned, his coat button caught onto my dress . . . I tried to turn with it so it wouldn't rip . . . and I . . . I . . . now just *look* at my gown!' She was soaked with champagne, like some strange human hors d'oeuvre, the damp material providing a wet T-shirt effect that O'Brien did not fail to appreciate.

'I will buy you ten gowns to replace it,' he said, and she knew he had been hooked.

Matthews hustled quickly across the room. 'Miss St John, are you – '

'Yes, I'm okay,' she nodded.

His concern for her instantly evaporated. 'Eduardo,' he said close to O'Brien's ear. 'There's been a little disturbance upstairs. Have you seen Miss St John's young escort around anywhere?'

O'Brien's golden eyes quickly scanned the room.

'You mean David?' said Joanna.

'Yo,' came a voice from behind her.

She turned and there he was – with the dark, Oriental-looking woman of O'Brien's on his arm.

'David, are you okay? I–I mean, are you – ?'

'I was just having a delightful conversation with Miss D'Arcy, here.' David was still inside of his tuxedo, not a hair out of place or a seam out of line. Each of them had a glass of champagne, and he lifted his. 'Happy birthday, Mr O'Brien.'

While O'Brien's attention was with Matthews, Joanna leaned close and hissed, 'I thought you didn't drink alcohol,' to David.

'It's a special occasion, isn't it?' The woman with the cat-like green eyes smiled at her. 'Tiara, would you please excuse me and Miss St John for just one moment?'

Tiara had no time to agree, because O'Brien whipped back around and interposed himself between David and Joanna. 'I'm sorry, young man, but I've already invited the lady for a nightcap.'

David looked instantly to Joanna for some explanation, puzzled. She entreated him with her eyes to play along resentful inside that he did not seem to notice the sacrifice she'd just made for him. 'Please, gentlemen,' she said diplomatically. 'This is flattering, but I really must change into something dry.'

'I guess there's no problem, then,' said David. 'In that case, I'll see you both later.' As he turned to lead Tiara away, he handed O'Brien his empty champagne glass.

This eye-for-an-eye gesture was not wasted on O'Brien. Fuming with anger, he grasped the glass so tightly that the stem snapped with a tinkle.

*'Michael, this business of hot pursuit for hours seems to be becoming our new career,' lamented KITT. 'We've been following this truck for three area codes now . . .'*

'Hang in there, partner,' Michael said. He was beat, road-weary, but not defeated. 'I'm betting that the truck won't go much further than the range of a helicopter or private jet from Matthews' main area of movement.'

*'You could be talking a thousand miles, given that criterion.'*

He snorted. 'You had to remind me.'

The digital clock on the Super Dash utilised the little blinking colon between the hour and minute readouts. Each time Michael glanced at it, it tried to hypnotise him, and he had put KITT into AUTO CRUISE and dozed off more than once. Now he was beginning to simply wear out; they'd been at it for . . . how long? Forty-eight hours straight? He tried to judge time starting with his stop at the Royal Palms Motel – of course, he'd been awake for that. Then the recon trip to Arthur Abrahms' murder site . . . the return . . . seeing David Dalton for the first time . . . the truck ride into dawn and the fight in the warehouse (his left arm now ached horribly; penance, he supposed) . . . Michael gave up. He'd been at it without sound sleep or a decent meal for a long time.

'KIT, I'm catching forty, okay?' he said at last.

‘Again,’ said the car, switching to the AUTO CRUISE mode. ‘*What about me, Michael? What am I to do for conversation during this tedious pursuit?*’ Lately KITT seemed to have become . . . well, petulant.

‘Hum to yourself,’ Michael suggested. ‘Or –’

‘*Hang on, Michael,*’ KITT said abruptly, cutting speed fifty per cent without warning.

Michael lurched forward and the adrenalin rush woke him up. ‘What?’

‘*The truck has slowed down and diverged from the paved roadway.*’ The video readout depicted the green target circle moving slowly west off the desert highway.

‘How’s your suspension for a little all-terrain recon?’ said Michael.

‘*Whenever we do this my vents get all clogged up with dust.*’

‘You need to enjoy offroad travel more,’ he suggested, flipping back the shielded toggle cover with his thumb and depressing the round green button that would convert KITT to his A-T mode. There was a soft hiss of hydraulics as KITT’s body shell elevated slightly from the chassis and the four-wheel drive engaged. Governor shields bracketed KITT’s tyres – they were foam-filled, puncture-proof, high traction jobs developed by Knight Labs, but their street size would hamper them if they hit deep sand, and so the governors compensated. In the All-Terrain mode KITT was something more than a street machine, something less than a dune buggy.

They diverged from the highway and cut a path over the sandy landscape. The topography had changed as they drew out of range of Los Angeles, and was very hilly. Michael had not actually made visual contact with their quarry for over two hours.

‘*Michael, sensors indicate that the truck has ceased progress altogether, just over the next rise. There’s a barbed wire fence running along the crest of the ridge, with posted metal signs claiming it to be a restricted US military test area. In point of fact, it is not – according to the latest survey maps of the area.*’

‘It’s a fake to keep visitors from snooping. Stop here; I’ll check it out on foot.’

He reached over and punched open the glove compartment, withdrawing the one souvenir he had kept from his old life as a police lieutenant named Michael Long – a .357 Magnum in a worn shoulder holster of brown leather. Since he had joined the FLAG programme, he had abhorred the use of guns . . . but he was getting tired of having them waved at him by the bad guys, and was wary of more guard dogs like the Rottweiler David Dalton had knocked out with a nerve pinch back at the Matthews cement plant.

KITT noticed, though, and felt compelled to make Michael think twice. ‘*Michael . . . a gun?*’

*Is it really necessary?’*

‘No arguments, pal. I’m not going to shoot anybody I don’t have to. Trust me, I used to be a cop.’ He pulled a pouch containing a pair of Nitefinder binoculars from the back seat. ‘Back in a flash.’

*‘Don’t shoot yourself in the foot.’*

‘What?’ He couldn’t quite believe what he heard.

*‘That was a joke, Michael.’*

He shook his head. ‘I guess my sense of humour needs a tune-up. Or maybe yours does.’ He was not sure just who had got more humourless lately. Probably himself.

He slung on the shoulder holster and the pouch and scrambled up the side of the knoll toward the fence. He carefully peeked over the rise just as a guttural diesel roar echoed through the little valley below.

There was a tight ring of worklights in aluminium scoops, similar to the night-time floods used by highway department workers. A half-circle of industrial dump trucks waited off to one side, and a yellow Caterpillar scoop loader had just fired up its engine. The ponderous machine moved on treads toward a mouth-like hole in the side of the hill. Sentries stood idly by, smoking, keeping watch, equipped with FM walkie-talkies and the same Uzi sub-machineguns Michael had seen back at the cement plant.

He put the Nitefinder binoculars to his eyes and the landscape lit up in green relief. Drivers lounged in the cabs of the dump trucks, stretching, sharing a spiked Thermos of coffee. One of the nearby mounds in the side of the hill was apparently man-made – dirt from the hole, he assumed. A mineshaft trolley poked out of the hole, upended, and added dirt to the pile where the scoop loader rolled in from the opposite side and gouged a huge bite of loose earth from the same pile. One of the dump trucks backed into position as the loader swivelled around ninety degrees and dumped its load.

Michael swept back. Three men, apparently not drivers or guards, were huddled in the shadow of one of the parked trucks. Michael watched as the first truck, now full, rolled away. The second truck started its engine . . . and one of the men promptly jumped into the back and laid flat. His two partners hustled over to the next truck in line, taking great care not to be seen.

The loader dropped another huge spoonful of fresh earth into the second truck, burying the man Michael knew was in there.

The next man jumped into the back of the next truck. His partner made ready to sprint

toward the following truck in line . . . and ran face first into a guard who had moved around the trucks into the darkness to answer a call of nature.

The guard stuck his machinegun in the man's face and his hands went up. Orders were barked. The guard pointed with his gun to the third truck and the man huddled inside, waiting to be buried, was busted.

The second truck was just moving away from the scoop loader. The two renegades were collected and led away. The guard jumped up onto the truck's running board and surveyed the contents. He called the other men over. For a moment Michael thought they were going to dump the load and sift it, but as it turned out, nobody bothered. There was obviously a schedule to be kept. So the guard leaned over and fired several bursts from the machinegun into the load of dirt, raking it back and forth, not missing a square inch of area.

The shots echoed in the valley, and then everything was very still, except for the idling motor of the scoop loader.

Michael focused the Nitefinders. The two men of the trio that had been apprehended were led back toward the hole, the cave, the mineshaft, whatever it was. They looked like Mexicans and were dressed like the wetbacks Arthur Abrahms had seen crossing the border two night ago.

Could O'Brien be running illegals across the border to serve as a sort of slave labour, Michael thought. It made sense – gold financed the operation, and the expenses were cut by using workers you didn't have to pay. Matthews supplied the industrial equipment and the facilities. And a home-made Stiletto rocket launcher was marrying up with a truckload of missiles in the middle of the desert . . . and the guards had orders to shoot to kill.

The dump truck containing a full load of earth and one perforated dead body rolled away, taking the road on which Michael and the truckload of missiles, with the launcher, had come.

'KITT,' he said into his comlink. 'Buzz Devon – wake him up if you have to. Use the scramble codes; ultra top secret.'

*'What enquiry, Michael?'*

'Ask him if there are any military installations around here that no one's supposed to know about – experimental labs, top-secret test facilities, that sort of thing.'

He had a gut hunch that was what the men in the valley were tunnelling toward.

## Chapter 8

Joanna opened her eyes. She'd thought she'd heard a peculiar noise.

The bedroom window of her suite at the Miramar was grey with the illumination of predawn. After having her nightcap with Eduardo O'Brien she'd hustled straight home and fallen into bed – alone – to sleep a dreamless sleep. The double-dealing of the night before had left her drained of energy. O'Brien and Matthews – they had murdered Arthur, or caused his murder. And now she was on the inside track with both of them.

She dozed for ten minutes more, then rose. On the way to the master bathroom she let her nightgown drop from her body and strode naked to the wonderfully hot shower that waited for her there.

As she bathed, letting the steaming water simultaneously shock her to wakefulness and lull her with its heat, she knew her job as amateur spy was not finished. David needed the combination of O'Brien's safe to nail him. She might have to sleep with O'Brien to get the combination, a thought that made her shudder, even inundated in hot water. Or, a darker part of her mind suggested, she could seduce O'Brien, kill him before anything happened, and forget about David's investigation. She was out for revenge, remember?

Towelling off her hair, she decided to forget about room service and make coffee for herself in the kitchen. The muscles of her sculpted nude body moved together like those of a graceful jungle cat as she walked out of the bedroom.

She stopped dead in the doorway. David Dalton was hanging upside-down from the archway between the living room and kitchen. She yelped in panic, at first thinking O'Brien had killed him and left his corpse hanging like a souvenir from the Mexican Mob.

But then the upside-down man spoke to her. 'Morning, Joanna,' he said. 'You don't have any clothes on.'

She swore and ducked behind the threshold of the bedroom door. 'What the hell are you doing in my apartment – *hanging* around like some kind of vampire bat?'

David, his feet encased in gravity boots hooked over the exercise bar attached to the archway, did another slow, agonizing, upside-down situp. The muscles in his stomach



rippled. 'You know,' he gasped, sweat dripping from his body, 'You're in pretty good shape for a woman of your age.'

'What's *that* supposed to mean!' she shrieked, nearly stepping out to shake her fist at him before remembering she was still naked. She dashed back toward the bed to collect her bathrobe.

'Do you always sleep this late?' he called. 'Day's half-over already.'

'I'm a night person,' she muttered, stomping past him to get to the kitchen. 'I hate health food. I hate exercise. And I hate fitness nuts!' Then she remembered that David's presence in her living quarters was also strange. 'And why the hell are you here? What . . . what're you doing here! Who gave you a key to my . . .'

David shrugged, upside-down.

'Oh,' she said knowingly. 'Of *course*, I should have *known*, you never use a key to get into any place!'

'Calm down, Joanna.'

She laughed harshly, snidely. 'Pardon me – I always expect to find sweaty bat people hanging around my living room . . . *will you come down from that thing!*'

'Yes, dear,' he said, disengaging himself and grabbing a towel from his duffle bag. There was a box of his stuff on the floor – racquetball racquet, jars of vitamins and protein powder, a couple of cheesy paperbacks, balled socks. Clothes were flung over the divan. 'As for what I'm doing here, it should be obvious that I'm moving in with you.'

She dropped her measuring spoon, spilling coffee all over the counter, staring at him with blazing eyes. Then all the fire went out of her. 'I cannot deal with this,' she said to herself, and then went on making coffee as though the motions were crucial to world security. 'You are a bloody lunatic. I want you out of here.'

'No can do. Miramar's booked solid.'

'Then sleep on the roof!'

'Calm down,' he said again, 'and face facts. O'Brien thinks you and I are lovers. If you nuzzled up to him even half as much as I think you did last night, he's going to start keeping an eye on you. He might even bug your phones. But for now, it won't do to have you staying here and me languishing over at the Rocking 69 Motor Lodge for twelve bucks a night. *Capice?*'

Joanna made a strangled noise in her throat.

'O'Brien's not the only one. You're forgetting your pal Prissy Ragsdale with the 700 rpm

mouth.' He mimicked Priscilla's breathless voice: "'I hear you two lovebirds are *quite close*," wink-wink-wink. "How long have you two kids been together?"'

'Oh my God. What did you tell her?'

'I made her smile knowingly.'

'Oh my God . . .' She was mortified.

'I'm sorry if this is difficult for you,' he said, giving another of his fateful shrugs.

'It's not difficult,' she said, businesslike. 'It's unacceptable.'

He cleared his throat, seeing her rebelliousness boil up. 'Straighten out your facts, Miss high-and-mighty St John! I'm here to conduct a bloody investigation, and I shouldn't give one whit of a damn whether it abrades your overdeveloped rich-girl sensibility or not! Secondly, I've got my *own* life, as much as that may shock you, and I enjoy it. How I can do that without piles of money may shock you even more. I don't care. But it's not my idea of a grand time hanging around the fringes of your stupid social tête-à-têtes, playing David the Doormat and empty glass holder to those monied buffoons you call your pals!'

She looked pallid, and was rubbing her hands together. 'David,' she said, quietly, hurt, 'will you please stop going on about the money? Okay?'

He stopped in mid-tirade. 'Right.' He took a bar stool and faced her across the counter, his tone softening. 'Joanna, this isn't a game. We're in this for real. And more people could get killed, and they could be us.'

She nodded, swallowing hard.

'That was some move you did to the security guards last night.'

She smiled, for the first time.

'Oh, I noticed,' he continued. 'I saw the guards run up to O'Brien, and a second after that you were in the way. There's some backbone in there I didn't expect.'

Pouring coffee, she regained some of her humour. 'Go jump in the lake,' she smiled.

'And lighting out after O'Brien like that took guts, I'll admit.'

'Well, it wouldn't do if *you* came onto him, now would it?'

'Your advantage,' he said. 'Let me show you something else.' He rummaged around in his clothing and came up with the printout sheet from Matthews' computer.

She unfolded and scanned it. 'RAZORTEETH,' she read. 'RIPPER sub BIODEATH. Sounds charming.'

'It's from Matthews' "BOCA" file.'

Her eyes sparked. 'As in *Boca Culebra*?'

‘Yup. Now those code names sound like military projects to me – weapons systems, chemical warfare, that sort of thing. I’m willing to bet that those code names can be found on the documents O’Brien purchased from his Defence Department connection. The most secure place they could be is on O’Brien’s yacht, in the safe. I know that because he changed the combination as soon as he thought the safe was in jeopardy. I’ve got to get a look at those documents.’

‘All safes have combinations,’ she said.

‘Yeah,’ he shrugged. ‘I’m sure Fort Knox has a combination somewhere, but that doesn’t mean it gets you in.’

‘I’ll see what I can do.’ That simply, that outrageously, she was committed, as though it was her constitutional right to risk her life.

‘You can’t do it, Joanna, it’s too – ’

‘Dangerous? You have a really short memory, David.’ She sipped coffee, glanced at the clock, her plan coalescing. ‘Michael Knight made the same mistake, wasting a valuable resource like me. Besides, you really have no choice – my house, my rules, as my mother used to say.’ She leaned across the counter and lifted a nearby telephone.

‘What are you doing?’ David hated losing control of the situation in the way he just thought he had.

‘I’m calling the man who murdered my husband,’ she said. ‘I’m going to force him to invite me out to lunch. I don’t think he’ll take too much convincing.’

She smiled her dazzler smile, and David gulped.

Temple, the hyper-reactive security guard, stood on the balcony of Elton Matthews’ office, overlooking the sea. Eduardo O’Brien’s yacht bobbed around out there; O’Brien had taken some woman he’d met at his birthday party the previous night out for a little sun and fun on the deck, and maybe some monkey business below decks.

He moved over to the bookcase nearest the sliding glass doors, pulled a copy of *The Sensuous Man* halfway out, then shoved it back. He reached up to the paperback shelf, did the same to a copy of *Christina’s Hideaway*, then the bookcase hinged on the left with a click and swung silently open.

There was a wealth of videotape equipment in the narrow niche, humming and glowing. He spot-checked it without much interest, then froze.

The counter on the surveillance deck had recorded some tape time. Normally this would

have set off an alarm on his page beeper, and made a tiny red LED blink on the box. There had been some kind of technical foul-up. It happened a lot: no one had really bothered to learn the ins and outs of the surveillance system Matthews had installed the day after he'd purchased the beach house from the Ragsdales. He'd insisted on a system that could be 'operated by idiots' anyway, so maybe he deserved what he'd got.

Each room of the house, even the bathrooms, was keyed to time-sharing remote-controlled videotape surveillance. The office was the only room with a security alarm keyed to activation of the camera – that was what had failed to go off. Other desks on the rack had recorded random time samples – there was footgate from the party, of O'Brien slicing the cake, and later, after Joanna St John had had her nightcap and left, of O'Brien and Tiara D'Arcy in bed.

Temple rewound the tape keyed to the office camera. It had spun off about six minutes of tape. He punched the broadcast through to a monitor on the other side of the room. He had to patch the connection twice on the control keyboard; none of the guards could work the damned thing properly yet, anyway.

The screen fizzed to life with video snow, the sound up too loud. He toned it down by pressing another button, then commenced the playback at twice normal speed. The time-hack digits superimposed across the bottom of the screen read EXL: 11.45.33 PM / DATA TRANS 004000 / 13 JULY/ RESTRICTED.

Then, with a little stab of horror sinking into his chest, Temple watched David Dalton enter, take a sheet of printout from the computer, and vanish out of the sliding glass doors. The same man he had seen enter the bathroom across the hallway last night, then come out six minutes later, looking totally innocent.

Matthews would kill him, which he could handle, or fire him, which he could not. Maybe the man could be made to understand it was a technical slip-up on a newly installed system that still needed bugs worked out of it. Temple fervently hoped so, because his training and loyalty made it impossible for him *not* to pick up the phone.

'We have an alert,' he said after punching in the coded emergency number. 'A class red security breach. Contact Matthews immediately.'

A wraith-like waiter appeared with fresh crab salads and vanished before Joanna could get a good look. Across the table, Eduardo O'Brien smiled at her. The gold edging on his teeth winked. Today he wore a khaki shirt with gold metallic piping. The solid gold belt buckle on

his pants was as big around as the plates on which the crab salad was served.

‘You’re a paradoxical man,’ she said, watching the swell and fall of the rolling ocean surface. The yacht swayed gently beneath them as they lunched out on deck. Far in the distance, Matthews’ beach house could be picked out – it was merely a brown dot against the vaster tan of the sandy beach. ‘A study in contrasts – even your name. Are you Mexican or Irish?’

‘I am, you might say,’ he said around a mouthful of crab salad, ‘a product of selective breeding, the best of two worlds – strong, dark Mexican blood from my father, imparting knowledge in the ways of the worker’s world and venerable old Spanish nobility, and the scalding white practicality that comes of my mother’s equally pure Irish blood. My heritage is of revolutionaries and kings.’

All that, she thought, and modesty, too.

‘My mother and father had two things in common – Catholicism and sex. Neither was enough; they were matched like electricity with magnetism. People come together, they share and learn all they can, then they . . . detach. Don’t look so surprised. The business of living is very much like the ocean.’ He swept his hand toward the sea. ‘If the water does not remain in motion, it goes bad. And like a shark in those waters, I must move forward, relentlessly, never stopping . . . or I will die.’

‘There’s more than that to you,’ she said, working on his ego.

‘Tell me,’ he said eagerly. ‘What do you see?’

‘A hunter – you pride yourself on your skill with weapons. You take what you want, or so you say.’

‘It is such seeming ruthlessness that . . . attracts you to me, is it not?’ He grinned, thinking he knew what was going on.

‘Perhaps. You’re a gambler – you enjoy taking risks. You rarely turn down a challenge to your manhood.’

‘Never,’ he asserted.

‘You’re not ruthless so much as directly logical. You have discovered that approach gets you what you want the fastest. You like playing and winning.’

‘I never lose,’ he nodded, staring down the front of her blouse.

‘So, logic tells me that if I challenged you to a skeet shoot at, say, a thousand dollars a disc . . . you couldn’t say no.’

He clapped his hands together, enormously pleased. ‘I *would* not say no to you! Ah, a

sportswoman *and* a gambler! A fighter, too, perhaps?’ His eyes glistened with anticipation, the gold in them emerging as he thought of taking her money, beating her at skeet shooting, and besting her in other contests of skill. ‘Ricardo!’ he bellowed. ‘Bring the shotguns and the skeet launcher!’

Ricardo, their waiter, dutifully trotted out, placing the shotguns against the starboard rail. ‘Mr O’Brien? Mr Matthews has an urgent call for you on line one.’

‘Excuse me,’ O’Brien said, and hustled off.

Joanna had no doubts that O’Brien was a crack shot, and that anger, tension, or a challenge such as she had just thrown down would make him even better. He not only liked working under pressure, he preferred it. What she needed was an advantage. When the deck was clear, she lifted one of the shotguns, balanced the barrel between the two guard rails on a boat ladder that descended toward the water’s surface, and levered it backward, leaning against it, bending the barrel ever so slightly out of true. Then she picked up the other shotgun, and as O’Brien re-emerged on deck, she jacked a round into the chamber with experienced motions.

Noticing O’Brien’s irritated expression, she said, ‘Something wrong, Eduardo?’

‘Hm? Oh – nothing. An annoying piece of business.’ Matthews had called about the theft of the BOCA printout, and David Dalton, who had been with Joanna the previous night . . . but that had been before she had met and been overwhelmed by Eduardo O’Brien, he thought. ‘I told them I did not wish to be distracted from you,’ he said evasively, automatically picking up the other shotgun.

‘Pull!’ Joanna shouted to Ricardo, who let a disc fly out over the sea. She whipped the shotgun into the firing line and blew the disc to dust.

‘You shoot well,’ he allowed.

‘I come from a family of hunters myself.’ She was aware of just how easy it would be to shove the wide bore of the shotgun into O’Brien’s chest and fill his black heart with buckshot . . . but she bided her time.

O’Brien fired and missed. The skeet disc splashed into the sea and sank. No one was more surprised than Eduardo. A tight smile wormed across his face. ‘One thousand dollars,’ he said gamely. ‘Your turn.’

*Boom!* Joanna’s second disc flew apart into fragments.

When O’Brien had missed five in a row, panic sweat was visible on his forehead. ‘Incredible,’ he whispered, the dark anger bubbling just beneath his civilised veneer. ‘I’ve

never missed five in a row in my life! Pull!’ He cut loose his next shot. A piece of shot nicked the disc, making it wobble in the air, but it remained intact as it plummeted toward the ocean. O’Brien fired at it again, speed-pumping the action, and missed again.

‘Make that six in a row,’ said Joanna. ‘I’ll only count the two shots as one, because I’m ahead.’

With a kind of primal scream, Eduardo snarled and hurled the shotgun into the ocean, making for a convenient disposal of evidence, Joanna thought. He mopped his brow. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘It’s very frustrating. A bet is, of course, a bet. Let’s have a drink in my stateroom.’

She followed along, staying close by virtue of his aching desire to conquer her. When he leaned under his desk to get at the safe, she did not pretend nothing was going on. ‘Eduardo?’ she said, ‘what on earth are you doing? Oh – a safe.’ She shrugged as if everyone she knew had safes, and they bored her.

When he looked up to intercept her, to keep her from leaning over and peering into the recess beneath the desk, he bungled the combination as she had intended. When he re-dialled it, she interrupted him with, ‘I’ll turn my back, okay?’

‘Yes, yes – fine.’ He re-dialled a third time.

When he came up, Joanna discreetly tucked her make-up mirror back into her jacquard bag. When her hand came out, it was holding a microscopic string bikini comprised of perhaps half an ounce of tan material. She unbuttoned her blouse. Whatever he had to say about the safe was forgotten.

‘Is there someplace I can, um, change into this?’ she said innocently.

O’Brien bobbed his head up and down, pointed toward the stateroom’s bathroom, and then counted out Joanna’s winnings from the safe with trembling hands.

## Chapter 9

Joanna returned to the Miramar by five o'clock that afternoon. David was still loitering about her living room; apparently it was moot that his residence there would last until the conclusion of his peculiar personal mission.

He sat at the breakfast bar, wringing his hands. This time it had been him, not Joanna, who experienced unexpected outrage – in a way, he was being paid back for surprising her in such an embarrassing way that morning.

'You told Eduardo O'Brien you were married to a Greek tycoon who owned his own private *island*?' he said, not quite believing the breadth of Joanna's flagrant lie.

'It's the best I could manage on short notice,' she said. 'His questions about my past were very direct, probing, almost. He knew the things he wanted to clarify and he went after them. You know how O'Brien pursues things.'

'I know how he's pursuing you, and I don't like it.'

Joanna sidestepped the issue gracefully. 'It's not for you to like or dislike. Just be aware of what I told him, okay?'

David's caution advised him. 'What if he decides to check up on you?'

'I had a chat with Prissy Ragsdale on the phone; she'll verify most of the line of crud I trowelled out for O'Brien's benefit.'

He sighed. 'Eduardo O'Brien won't stop with a phone call to a personal friend . . .'

'Do you suggest I call him up right now, give myself up, and throw myself on his mercy?'

'Okay, okay, sorry . . . Let me think.' He grabbed the phone and quickly punched in eleven digits for long-distance. 'What time is it?'

'About a quarter after five.'

'Add two, no three, hours and that gives us just past eight pm in Washington . . . Hello, Archie, it's – damn! A tape machine.' He simmered while the taped message played through three thousand miles away. After the beep, he spoke loudly: 'Archie? Archie, this is David. If you're listening, turn the answerphone off. If you're not, call me at –' He hesitated. Someone had cut past the tape machine. 'Archie, is that you?'



Joanna stood by, mildly amused by this spectacle.

‘Archie, I need what you might call a tiny favour. The woman I mentioned? No, not that one – Joanna St John, I mean.’

Joanna frowned at him. What did he mean *not that one*?

‘This is a really long story, but the thumbnail version is that Eduardo O’Brien cornered her and she had to lie about her past. In case he checks, I need you to cover for me – I know that’s kind of vague, but we’re doing the best we can out here . . . right. First off, no, this is the story, now – first off, she was married to a South African diamond broker who got killed in a mineshaft collapse. Then, like Jackie O., she remarried – a Greek shipping magnate named . . . uh . . .’

‘Cristatos Di Cristefano,’ she said, hiding a smile.

‘Uh, right.’ Covering the phone, he said, ‘How detailed was all of this?’

She shrugged helplessly. ‘It was a long lunch out there on the yacht.’

‘Uh-huh. Look, Archie, I’m going to give you to Joanna so she can tell you firsthand. Right.’ He held out the receiver. ‘Joanna, meet my buddy Archibald Hendley, of the Justice Department.’

She made a tiny moue with her mouth to show she was impressed.

‘Charm him,’ David said. ‘And I think he’ll cover our little fabrication.’

Joanna nodded and set to work. ‘Present for you,’ she said as she lifted the phone and handed David a scrap of toilet paper.

At first he thought it was some rude joke, then he unfurled it and saw the number sequence: *2 trns to 30, 1 trn to 44, 1 trn back to 30, 2 trns to 21*. It was scrawled in red lipstick which was starting to bleed into the absorbent tissue.

His mouth fell open. He waved to get her attention as she talked on the phone. ‘Is this – ?’ he mimed frantically. She nodded victoriously.

David held the new combination to Eduardo O’Brien’s yacht safe in his hand, and looked back at Joanna with something like dawning admiration.

Underwater again in his all-black scuba suit, David was thinking about Tiara D’Arcy.

She had saved his skin at the party, just as he’d rushed back down the stairs after his rooftop adventure, linking arms with him and supporting his line that the two of them had been chatting while the rifling of Matthews’ computer bank was transpiring upstairs.

Now why had she come forward and done that? Jealousy over O’Brien favouring Joanna

St John? David didn't think so.

O'Brien's yacht, the *Conquistador*, listed in the calm black water just above him, deck lights casting an amber glow and illuminating some of the silt and meandering fish over his head.

Joanna's aghast expression – when she discovered David had stowed his scuba gear behind her sofa – did not stay on her face long, David remembered. She was gradually getting used to being shocked by him . . . and preparing little jolts of her own to lob back at him. David surprised himself by thinking, for the first time, that perhaps he and Joanna were that rarest of combinations – an evenly matched male-female team. She had the breeding, the class, the stamina and the courage; he had the spiritual mindset and the athletic grace. After she had found the scuba tanks and the wetsuit, she wandered back to the kitchen, idly commenting that she thought he could use some clothing that fitted him. Then she promptly plunked six thousand dollars in hard cash down on the kitchen counter. 'Why don't you go buy some?' she said, sweetly. David was still sucking air as she left to freshen up.

When she told him how she had finessed the money out of Eduardo O'Brien, he had laughed with her. And when she told him that today O'Brien had insisted on kissing her, and that he had got his wish, David's left eye started twitching uncontrollably. Thinking of O'Brien's paws on Joanna's body made him want to fly into a rage.

But why?

He pushed the thought from his mind and meditated himself into a calmer state before breaking the surface of the water near the aft end of the *Conquistador*. He shinnied up an anchor rope, taking care not to rock the boat in the slightest, and moved hand-over-hand along the safety railing until he was facing the cabin hallway, as he had two nights ago.

He hung there singlehandedly, timing the circuit made by the gun-lugging guards until he had the pattern down. He switched hands on the rail, to relieve fatigue. Five minutes later, he was padding stealthily down the corridor, not even leaving wet footprints as evidence of his passage, for in hanging off the rail to time the guard's movements, his suit had dried speedily.

In a soft plastic pouch clipped to his scuba belt, there was a Minolta SX 16-millimetre spy camera containing ultrafast film and a Rokkor 1:28 f-20-millimetre lens. It did not require a flash unit, and took high-density sub-miniature slides in natural light. It had been a gift from Archibald Hendley, good old Archie.

Taped to the top of the camera was the combination Joanna had won for him. Rather than stopping to think, self-pityingly, about what she might have had to do to get it, he decided to

use it and be shut of it.

He twirled the dial. As with the first combination, the primary number was for dial revolutions, the secondary for the dial number. This time, the bolt clicked back when he turned it. There did not seem to be any booby-traps.

The safe seemed to contain nothing but money, banded stacks of high-denomination currency, not only American money but Swiss, French, Guatemalan and Nicaraguan bills. Then came some bound leatherette folders of the type used to store insurance papers and legal documents. On the bottom was a pouch stencilled DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE.

Each page of the dossier was stamped with the hard red SYSTEMS CONFIDENTIAL / EYES ONLY logo.

Laying the file out on the desk blotter, which was bare of paperwork, David began snapping pictures, two shots per page of the dossier. In moments he was finished.

Everything went back into the file in reverse order. David was experienced at this sort of covert rummaging; he had stored the exact position of each object in the safe in his memory. Though sorely tempted to liberate one or two of the banded stacks of hundred-dollar bills, he replaced them all. The loss of several grand would not even faze O'Brien, and it might point to the fact that the safe was tampered with. Besides, Joanna had just given six thousand dollars of money from the same safe to him, freely, that morning.

All that was left was getting back to the rail, and thence to the sea. O'Brien and his cronies were out on the town this evening, and the only people aboard appeared to be skeleton staff and the usual sentries.

As he buttoned up the safe and returned to the cabin door, he never noticed Tiara D'Arcy, watching him with interest through the starboard porthole.

Joanna sifted through the photographs on the breakfast bar while David talked to Archie Hendley on the phone. Page after page of cryptic bureaucratese . . .

David scribbled notes furiously, wishing he'd hooked a tape recorder to the phone to get down the facts as fast as Archie was reciting them. In the clear space at the bottom of the page he wrote C-130 and boxed it three times. Then: *DALLAS – 1 P.M. – TOMORROW.*

'Okay, Archie, we'll do what we can,' he said, wearied. 'I don't know. Joanna says Michael Knight came back about two hours ago; he's conked out in the bedroom. All I can say is we'll try – we haven't come this far to screw up now. Right. 'Bye.'

'Sounds earth-shaking,' said Joanna, sipping a cup of homemade *café crème*.

‘According to my good buddy Archie,’ said David, consulting his notes, ‘FIREKILL is some kind of government-funded research programme involving red diamonds and laser shielding; talk about your *Star Wars* defence programmes . . . RIPPER sub BIODEATH is research into modifying the gas-tipped armour-piercing bullets utilised in the ARMS-70MP recoilless rifle. They’re monkeying around with the chemical make-up of the slugs so that whoever gets hit suffers an instant coronary.’

‘God,’ she exclaimed, not wanting to even think about what her tax dollars were funding.

‘And those other numbers. The Stiletto, we know what that is already. The AMR-10 is a modified version of the American 180 laser-sighted machinegun; O’Brien and Matthews somehow have a lock on 330 of them. Ditto the M-19BH, which is very innocuous shortform for an acid gas grenade that can lay down a spread pattern a hundred yards in diameter. Let that gas anywhere near you and you’d better have a will all made out. It’s absorbed through the skin; any exposed skin surface. It uncouples the nervous system, like rattlesnake venom, only a million times faster – instantaneously. Now, as for RAZORTEETH and MOONBLAST, those are –’

‘Please, I don’t want to hear any more,’ she said, holding up her hand as a sign of surrender. ‘This stuff scares the starch out of me, David. Acid gas and instantaneous nerve death. Ugh.’ She shuddered.

‘Sorry. But the point of this is –’

‘Do you drink coffee?’ she said, offering him a cup. ‘I mean, on special occasions, like champagne?’

‘Sure, thanks’

‘You were saying the point of this was . . . what?’

‘That none of these weapons are officially acknowledged by the military. The appropriations for them don’t even exist, except in the codes on the papers that O’Brien bought from the Defence Department spy.’

‘Eduardo O’Brien has tapped into the United States’ storehouse of experimental, top-secret weaponry?’

‘You got it. He and Matthews have got their hands on stuff our own army doesn’t even have yet. And here’s the kicker – Matthews recently purchased a C one-thirty.’

‘Which is?’

‘A military cargo transport – a real workhorse aircraft.’

‘You mean one of those enormous things with the nose that hinges open, like a sky-

tanker?’

‘No,’ David said. ‘One of those, like the C-5A or a C-141, is beyond even O’Brien’s grasp, with a price tag of something like fourteen million. But if he was shrewd, he could pick up a C-130 for around four million. Three million, if he paid in cash.’

‘O’Brien’s gold shipments,’ she nodded. ‘It all meshes together pretty neatly.’

‘Archie says that Matthews has filed a flight plan for the damned thing, too. It leaves a private airstrip outside Dallas at exactly one in the afternoon, tomorrow.’

‘So *Boca Culebra* – whatever it is – happens tomorrow morning?’

‘I’d lay odds on it.’ He fixed her with his eyes. ‘Lady, if you hadn’t come up with that combination, we’d all be sunk and not even know it.’

‘The numbers were useless without you to secret-agent your way in there and make them useful,’ she said, raising her coffee mug. ‘Here’s to 007 and the Lady from UNCLE. Cheers.’ She clinked mugs with him.

‘I think we’d better wake Michael up and go over this stuff; see what the Foundation can do.’

She caught up with him as he walked through the glass doors onto the balcony. In the distance the moon cast its pale light on the ocean. ‘Let him sleep for another hour; it won’t make any difference now,’ she said. ‘What I want to know is what Archie expects *you* to do tomorrow. Who is Archie, anyway – and don’t give me that “old buddy in the Justice Department” crap, either.’

He sighed, drawing a great drift of air into his lungs as though it was a burden. ‘Archie’s my boss, I guess you could say.’

‘You’re not answering the question.’ She scrutinised his face in the dark, then said, ‘David Dalton. Hmm. I never thought of *you* as a Fed, too.’

He turned, his expression confirming the truth. ‘I’m not a Fed. Not officially.’

‘And that acid gas stuff doesn’t exist. Officially.’

‘Yeah,’ he said with a rueful little smile.

‘Why do you do it?’ she said, more intrigued than accusatory. ‘Money? Patriotism? Don’t tell me – you’re trying to forget a tragic love affair, right?’

‘No, no, and no.’

‘Am I going to have to force you to talk to me? Come on, David.’ She leaned against the rail, facing him in such a way that he could not avert his eyes from her. She touched him in a reassuring way, comfortably.

'It's a long story,' he said. 'Long and boring.'

'I don't have a plane to catch,' she replied. 'I'm not interested in what's on TV, and I've got all night. Give me the *Reader's Digest* version if it bores you. It doesn't bore *me*.'

He felt her gaze drilling into him in the twilight. 'I . . . ah, got into a spot of trouble. In Guatemala.'

'Archie got you out of prison,' she said tonelessly.

He spun on her. 'What the hell did you do, run a data fetch on me? People don't guess things like that!'

'They do when it's written all over your face. You did some hard time down there. For what?'

'A youthful indiscretion,' he said. 'Unimportant. But Archie wanted somebody to kick off a pet project of his – something a lot like the FLAG programme and Michael Knight – and he cut a deal with the Guatemalan Army . . . and here I am.' He cleared his throat several times, finally taking a gulp of his lukewarm coffee. 'Let me ask you a question,' he said finally. 'You really loved Arthur, didn't you? No, scratch that; it's a stupid question. Of course you did. What I mean is – he's only been dead a week. It must be hard for you.'

She wasn't sure whether to be angry at him for prying. What was he getting at? 'What must be hard?'

'Looking into the eyes of the man who killed him. Smiling; letting him touch you and kiss you.'

She turned, tears in her eyes, and headed for the bedroom before she remembered it was occupied. David caught her arm and turned her back.

'I don't want to talk about it – '

He stopped her talking with a kiss, and her arms moved around him, and they stayed on the balcony for quite a long time, holding each other.

Later David took an exhilarating moonlight jog around the Miramar, burning off excess energy, pumping his legs up to sprinting speed. The night air rushing in and out of his lungs was cleansing, invigorating. In the morning he would resume his regimen of stress exercises, calisthenics, T'ai Chi and yoga; for now, he ran.

During his second circuit of the building's circumference, he became aware that he was being watched. Keeping his wits about him, he surveyed the parking lot and caught a glimpse of a dark figure bearing binoculars.

He ran around the property again; the figure was there, watching, waiting, it seemed, halfway across the lot.

When he had established the rhythm of circling the building, he changed course the moment he was out of sight, to come up unexpectedly behind the visitor.

Whoever it was, their senses were well-honed. David's foot hit a gravel patch, and his skid attracted the notice of the person on whom he was attempting to sneak up. He suddenly found himself in pursuit.

The visitor could not match his speed, and David dived into a tackle twenty yards from the car where the quiet surveillance had been based.

He was a little surprised to see that the squirming figure caught in his grasp was Tiara D'Arcy.

She did not struggle. She merely drank him in with her wide, cool-green eyes. Her hair fell all around her shoulders, brazenly. 'Please, she said. 'Don't be angry with me – '

'I'm not angry . . . just kind of . . . er, surprised.' He helped her to her feet.

'I have to tell you,' she began. She seemed skittish and afraid, but not of him. She kept looking over her shoulder as though Eduardo O'Brien might be watching *her* through binoculars. 'I saw you tonight, on Eduardo's yacht. I saw you get into the safe.'

David played it safe himself, and kept quiet, to let her get out what she had to say.

'I'm not what you think I am. I'm not Eduardo's kept woman by choice. I saw you before – the first night, when I threw the Swiss knife into the water from the yacht, I saw you there, below, and I thought to myself, "perhaps someone has come to save me." Well, in a way, perhaps you have. Eduardo . . . won't release me. I'm in this country illegally. A happenstance of birth has left me with no nationality; I'm a kind of half-breed, like he is . . . but without the citizenship and papers that are so necessary in a country like America. Without Eduardo, I have no place to go.'

This flood of self-revelation was embarrassing for David. He was aware of dropping his usual caution to hear the tale of this beautiful, distraught girl.

'He'll kill me if I try to leave him. He kills people with those knives of his; he enjoys watching them die. He will kill you if you're not careful; he already suspects you and . . .'

'I know. Our personalities just didn't blend.'

She smiled bitterly. 'Help me to escape him, and I'll try to help you. My offer is that simple.' Her eyes were downcast.

'Find out how to disarm the security sytem in Elton Matthews' beach house,' he said, 'and

Eduardo O'Brien will never touch you again.' Tiara was not a 'plant'. She had seen him in action near the yacht twice now, plus covered for him at the party, all without asking favours. He owed Tiara and he knew it.

'I risked a lot just sneaking here to tell you,' she added. 'All the phones are bugged. You wouldn't have believed a phone call, anyway. You're right not to.'

'Tiara, I hit the safe, and a friend of mine knows about *Boca Culebra*. What we don't know is still inside of Matthews' computer. That's why we need you to help us to disarm the alarms in the beach house.'

'The guard that nearly stopped you – Temple,' she nodded. 'He favours the way I look. He runs the security there. I'll see what I can do.' Quickly she leaned forward and kissed him full on the mouth; not a sisterly kiss at all. 'I must leave now.'

And she was off and running for her car.

David shook his head. It had been a strange evening all round.



# Chapter 10

When no one responded to his knock on the door of Joanna St John's Miramar suite, Eduardo O'Brien had the bellman let him in. The ruse was a simple one – he had selected the most corruptible-looking bellman, and asked for directions while carrying an enormous bouquet of long-stem, blood-red roses. The flowers were done up with the usual ferns and baby's breath, plus some very characteristic twinings of gold foil, on O'Brien's insistence. The bellman saw the bouquet, and the ready smile on the face of the man wearing the amber-gold suit, and read money . . . and pounced, or so he thought.

'Ah,' said O'Brien. 'She's not in, as I thought.' He peeked into the bedroom. Nothing there. As the bellman set the bouquet on the dining room table, O'Brien unfolded a one hundred dollar bill and pressed it into the man's palm. 'If she says "yes" to me, my friend, you are invited to our wedding.' He smiled his broad, golden smile.

Interpreting this to mean there was more cash to be had, the bellman withdrew with a wink of collusion to O'Brien.

No sooner was the door closed and locked than the jolly, slightly dazed expression vanished from O'Brien's face. He moved quickly, and commenced his systematic search of Joanna's living quarters, noting first the gravity-boot bar David Dalton had installed in the kitchen archway.

He surveyed the obvious items on tabletops and counters then went for the contents of drawers. The art of clandestine search is governed foremost by the factor of time; often the searcher is compelled to begin with the most difficult items locked strongboxes or hidden niches – and work his way *down* to the contents of the trashcans. That was standard operating procedure for the CIA, the NSA, the FBI. O'Brien began with the trashcans.

Notes, coffee grounds, leftover food. Nothing.

He caught sight of the scuba gear stashed behind the sofa and nodded to himself.

The bathroom wastebasket was half-filled with used tissues and other fall-out from Joanna's makeup regimen. He unwadded each tissue carefully, like a dark-gold gypsy reading tea leaves.

At the bottom of the basket, half-blurred by water, was a wad of toilet paper. He unfurled it and read the fuzzy writing in lipstick thereupon – *2 trns to 30, 1 trn to 44, 1 trn back to 30* . . .

O'Brien's golden tan flushed to crimson with anger. He smelled the tissue. It was her lipstick – the same that had been on her lips, on *his* lips, yesterday afternoon, on the yacht.

With great control, he crushed the paper and replaced it on the bottom of the wastebasket.

David ran up the fire stairs of the Miramar, having just completed his workout in the resort's gym and spa area. He was sheened with sweat, huffing with effort but not exhaustion as he took the steps three at a time, emerging on Joanna's floor.

By now, he had his own key to the suite.

He was looking forward to opening up all the windows and taking a luxurious cold shower, when he spotted the bouquet on the table. There was no card. There did not need to be – the gold foil twining around the roses told enough of a narrative for David to see the truth.

My God! he thought – his scuba gear was here; the photos of the government documents from the safe were inside one of his duffles . . . and O'Brien might still be inside the suite, fondling one of his beloved knives of Swedish steel . . .

When the phone rang David nearly jumped out of his skin. It was Michael Knight.

'Any luck with Hendley?' was Michael's first question.

David knew the answer would not please him. 'I think I exploited my friendship with Archie as far as it could stretch, Michael. He told me about the weaponry, but when I asked about a possible experimental weapons depot out in the middle of the California desert, he clammed up – I don't think he wanted to say yea or nay . . . at least, not over the telephone. Bug paranoia.' He knew Michael was smiling at the ludicrousness of the thought. Governmental agencies are most frequently sabotaged by their own ineptitude, he knew – and not by any superhuman effort of inter-office surveillance. With hope he added, 'I may get something via express mail. But for now I just don't know. You're going to have to ask your Mr Devon Miles for *that* little bit of info, I'm afraid.'

'It all fits anyway,' said Michael. 'Like we discussed last night – *Boca Culebra* is O'Brien's effort to tunnel into a weapons dump we know is there but we can't get anybody to admit to . . . because the weapons are prototypes using bio-warfare kill-agents and other nasty stuff that we, being the world's good guys, aren't supposed to have. The *Boca* is the tunnel mouth, the

*Culebra* is the tunnel itself, dug by wetback labour – illegal aliens smuggled in by O'Brien. If there's a secret government weapons dump, I'd bet my life it's back there in the mountain beyond the digging operation I witnessed the other night. What I need to know is how far back the tunnel goes."

'If O'Brien wants the weapons, why build the Stiletto launcher for himself?'

'Because the dump is probably guarded, or shielded, or both.'

'He's going to blast his way into the weapons dump?'

'That's my guess – and wipe out any guards long-distance, without casualties to his own work force.'

'Then why dig a tunnel?'

'I think the plan is to create havoc with the rocket launcher while the goods leave via the tunnel.'

David smacked his head. 'I almost forgot! O'Brien was here, it looks like. He may be onto us—'

'If he's onto us,' came Michael's voice, 'why aren't you dead?'

'The warrior gods smile down on me,' he said. 'I've got to warn Joanna. Another thing – Matthews' C-130 departs Dallas at one o'clock. Figure a two-hour flight time; that means whatever they're going to do happens in about six hours.'

He couldn't see Michael slam his hand against KITT's dashboard in frustration. There was a brief, tight silence. Finally, he said, 'We can't wait on Devon to give the government a happy hand. David – can you get back into Matthews' office at the beach house and access the computer?'

'Probably, but why?'

'Because if you do it while I'm in range, with KITT, we can jump the incidental capacitance of the security shielding and interface.'

'I don't understand a thing you just said . . .'

'Look it's simple – the computer doubtlessly hooks up to a telephone link. Key the computer to the link, punch in KITT's telecommunications code, and hit the TRANSMIT key.'

'Michael, the playback of all the data in the *Boca Culebra* file alone would take days . . .'

'Not with the special code I'll give you – that's why KITT and I have to be close by. We'll interface with Matthews' computer directly through KITT's scanner – KITT can absorb everything in the computer and extrapolate from it in two or three seconds. The only reason

you have to use the phone link at all is to put the computer into the TRANSMIT mode. We'll suck the data out directly.'

'You mean you don't want to be in range just to save my hide in case I get in trouble?'

'The thought never occurred to me,' Michael came back.

'You know I'll have to use Joanna to get back in,' said David. 'I don't like doing that – we might be putting her in jeopardy if O'Brien knows what we're up to.'

'O'Brien may know, but he also wants Joanna – we might be able to fake him for one more round. Besides, you exploited Tiara D'Arcy without giving much of a damn.'

It was true. Stuck inside an advertising flyer with Joanna's junk mail had been a folded sheet of O'Brien's stationery. On it Tiara had included details about the video surveillance and alarm system at the Matthews' new beach house, just as David had requested last night. There was no getting around it – all of them had been dirtied by this mess, and they were all using each other ruthlessly, in a way friends should not have to. Did their end justify their means? David hoped Joanna would forgive him. Tiara, too . . .

'I'll see what I can do,' said David.

A key worked in the door lock; David tensed, then realised it had to be Joanna, back from her early-morning shopping trip. He quickly stripped the gold foil from the bouquet of roses, crumpled it into a tight tinfoil ball, and buried it in the kitchen trash with the phone still crooked under his ear.

'Joanna's just coming in,' he said. 'I'll talk to you when everything is set up.' He made sure the receiver was racked before Joanna entered.

'Hi there.' She was festooned with packages from various boutiques.

'Looks like the shopping sortie was a success.'

'Oh, moderate – it was nice to get my mind off everything for a while by an unabashed dose of conspicuous consumerism.' She was radiant this morning. 'Here. These are for you.'

He accepted several boxes from her arms, numbly.

'Well, I knew you wouldn't do any clothes shopping for yourself,' she said. 'You're not the type. You'll buy clothes, wear them till they drop off, then buy more clothes. Correct me if I err.'

He nodded. In essence, she had him down. Before he could start talking, she spotted the roses and caught her breath.

'These are *gorgeous*,' she said, with a gamine smile. 'I won't tell you you shouldn't have, because I deserve it!' Since the events of last night, he noticed, she seemed freer, happier,

more unburdened. 'And you are a nice person, totally contrary to that obnoxious façade you throw up to fool people.' She collected him into her arms and kissed him generously. 'Thanks for last night,' she whispered, then frowned as she sensed his tension. 'What's wrong? And don't say "nothing".'

He rejected the easy lie. 'We're running out of time. Michael needs to "access" Elton Matthews' computer, to get information about *Boca Culebra* out of it. That means I've got to get to Matthews' computer one more time, and I can't just drop in to make a social call.'

'But I can,' she said.

'Tiara D'Arcy told me how to defeat the alarm systems. To do that we need somebody on the inside. But I don't want to ask you to go back in there –'

'Who's asking? I volunteer.' She hugged him close.

'There's a danger, though . . .'

'I can handle Eduardo,' she said, slightly irritated at such a trifling detail.

Not if he knows you stole the combination to his safe, he thought. It never came past his lips, though. Ultimately, he knew he would willingly place Joanna in jeopardy to complete his mission, regardless of his feelings for her. It was ruthless, but necessary. If she went in not knowing they had been discovered, she would not act self-consciously. Perhaps he was underrating her skills; heaven knew she had performed exceptionally up to this point. But here, now, he couldn't bring himself to tell all . . . especially when he saw the look on her face won by the bouquet of roses.

'Tell me what I have to do,' she said, her enthusiasm to run wildly off and embrace her possible demise making David feel a little sick inside.

'Call Eduardo. Have him invite you to Matthews' beach house; I'll show you how to disarm the surveillance system. That's it.' And get out alive, pretty lady, he added in his mind.

'David, every time I touch you I can feel you flinch. What the hell's the matter?'

'Nervous habit.'

'I don't like prying,' she said analytically, 'but with you I'm kind of entitled. Listen to me: you helped me last night and I'd like to help you if I can. I don't really know a damned thing about you – I suppose nobody does – but I know whatever you've been through was rough. But that part of your life is *over* now. Give me a shot, kiddo – trust me.' She was holding his face in her hands, being infinitely gentle and understanding.

Something inside him melted away. 'Joanna, I –'

He was interrupted by the harsh ringing of the telephone. Joanna leaned past him to pick

it up on the second ring. Cupping the receiver, she said, 'Surprise – it's O'Brien.'

The moment between them was lost. David added the loss to his mental list of things that had been tainted by the fact Eduardo O'Brien lived on the earth.

With forced lightness, she said, 'Eduardo? Yes. I was wondering what your lunch plans were for this afternoon . . .?' She pulled away from David's embrace to talk.

David stared at the bouquet, O'Brien's love offering, with undiluted hatred.

Eduardo O'Brien put his feet up on the terrace railing, staring out from the beach house balcony toward the ocean. Tiara was sunbathing, lying motionless and nude on one of the chaise-longues. His gaze flickered over her slim, tanned, feline-muscled form. He felt nothing inside.

'The earlier the better,' he told Joanna over the phone. 'The day is hot and pleasant; bring your bikini and catch some sun.' A vagrant ocean breeze stirred the metallic-gold tassels on his shoes. 'Fine. Eleven o'clock will be fine.'

As he hung up, Matthews strode out onto the balcony.

'Six misses at skeet shooting,' Eduardo mused to himself. 'I should have realised then.' He lifted a carved wooden boomerang from the deck beside him, and toyed with the exotic weapon.

'Maybe we should postpone,' said Matthews, automatically consulting the gold digital watch Eduardo had given him.

'No.'

'Eduardo, they're onto us, for God's sake! Let's put it off one day, just one day. We can kill the woman, and David Dalton, and Knight in a day.'

'I don't wish to kill Joanna – not yet.' He fingered the boomerang and a shiver wormed down Matthews' spine at the sight, despite the heat.

'I don't see what good inviting her here, now, will do,' Matthews said.

'Don't worry, Elton,' he said, betraying his Spanish accent in the pronunciation of Matthews' first name. 'I have a plan. They desire information, but they do not realise that information is a narcotic. You always desire more of it. It becomes an addiction. Addictions kill people, not narcotics.' He smiled, recalling an old joke. 'Guns don't kill people; bullets kill people. They already have the gun. We shall supply the bullets and pull the trigger . . . but their fates will be of their own making, do you see? No? Well, it's not important. You'll see very shortly. I have everything under control.'

He smiled, the beach sun reflecting off all the gold he wore.

# Chapter 11

The three of them arrived at their respective posts at approximately the same time – Joanna, to the beach house in O'Brien's chauffeured limousine, courtesy of Elton Matthews; David, parking his rental car down the beach and waiting behind a grassy knoll near Matthews' beach house with a synchronised watch; Michael, parked with KITT up the access road, waiting to gobble up the information about to be spewed forth by Matthews' computer . . . should Joanna and David accomplish their tasks.

As Joanna approached the front door, she passed a parked station wagon with a partitioned rear cargo section containing a pair of surly-looking Rottweilers. The uglier of these was Jonas, the guard dog David had knocked out with a nerve pinch at the back of Elton Matthews' warehouse. He squatted in the back, licking himself and snapping at the other dog, until Joanna passed by, at which point he hurled himself against the shatterproof glass, barking horrendously and foaming at the mouth. Jonas knew how to put on a good show.

O'Brien greeted her, kissed her hand, and smiled his golden smile. He still held the hunting boomerang in one hand, and as he talked, he had a tendency to gesture idly with it, like a teacher using a pointer. 'I trust that the flowers pleased you?' he said. 'That they brightened up your morning?'

'They were marvellous,' she said, not missing a beat and being superlatively duplicitous – she would not allow her realisation that the flowers were not from David to show on her face.

'I have a small buffet set out on the terrace,' he said. His eyes glinted with golden fire. 'Cheeses, smoked meats, fresh fruit, champagne.'

She forced a smile. 'Sounds divine – I need to freshen up a bit first, though – the air conditioning in the limo is not working to full capacity. And I haven't put my bathing suit on yet.' She held the string bikini in the air as proof. 'Back in a flash.'

He watched her move up the stairs, admiring her figure and grace. As soon as she was gone his manner darkened considerably. He checked his solid gold Rolex, which read 11.35



precisely.

With any luck, Matthews' C-130 was already airborne.

David checked his watch. 11.40.

Using Tiara's directions, he had demonstrated to Joanna how to kill the power to the beach house's surveillance web, and had shown her exactly where to locate the power boxes in Elton Matthews' office. If all went well, he was to move in in exactly . . . five minutes.

He crouched on the knoll, back in his black commando gear. In the distance he saw Tiara rise from her lounge, slip into a bathing suit, and walk slowly down to the waterline on the beach, where she began to do calisthenics.

Matthews was standing on the balcony picking at a spread of food, looking up at the sun as though he hated the mysterious fireball, and constantly checking his watch.

It was 11.41. The next four minutes would seem like aeons to David, but he waited. It was all he could do.

KITT's digital chronometer clicked over to 11.42.

*'Michael, I should warn you that the computer interface will not allow me to maintain scanner surveillance on David once he is inside the grounds.'*

Troubled, all Michael could say was, 'He's taken care of himself so far, KITT. Ditto Joanna – she's quite a lady.'

*'So I noticed. Rather, I noticed you noticed.'*

'Another fledgling joke?' he ventured.

*'Not at all, MsSt John is quite capable. I hope she places herself in no undue jeopardy either.'*

'My sentiments exactly.'

Soundlessly, the digital clock displayed 11.43.

Joanna consulted her own watch while in the upstairs bathroom. 11.44. It was now or never.

She had changed quickly, to confirm the ruse she used to get upstairs alone. There were no guards in the hallway; apparently that was only for Eduardo's birthday party.

Quickly she stepped across to Matthews' office, and shut the door behind her. In two long, graceful strides she was at the bookcase. She pulled the hardcover of *The Sensuous Man* halfway out and shoved it back, then did the same for the paperback of *Christina's Hideaway*. The bookcase hinged obediently open and all the tape decks inside automatically clicked into

the POWER SAVER mode, suspending operation.

*Click, click, click*, she turned all the recorders off. Mounted on the left wall of the niche were three small lidded power boxes displaying red bubble lights. She opened the middle one and pulled the knife switch down. The red light winked to green.

That means GO in my book, she thought, and closed the lid. David, don't fail us now!

She closed up the bookcase unit, smoothed her blouse over her bathing suit, and quickly repaired to the hallway. It was 11.45 right on the nose.

From the balcony, Eduardo O'Brien looked up toward the bathroom window, smiled to himself, and popped a Vienna sausage into his mouth. At twenty-five seconds past 11.44, the beeper hooked to his belt went discreetly off. He had wired a bogey alarm to the surveillance control system, and just after Joanna had gone up the stairs, the system had been tampered with.

O'Brien was all smiles. He had just got the confirmation he needed. And now, Matthews would get his little thrill.

He turned and patted his partner on the shoulder. Matthews was watching Tiara work out on the beach. 'Go ahead, my friend,' he said. 'And make sure you surprise him. Surprise is always important, and delicious, when you are hunting wild game.'

Matthews grinned and patted the heavy Magnum inside his coat. As he went inside the beach house, Joanna emerged through the sliding glass doors to the balcony.

'Ah, there you are,' said O'Brien pleasantly. 'Right on time.'

David noticed the ugly watchdogs in the back of the station wagon on his way in. One of the dogs looked familiar.

He decided to gamble, to cut time, and jumped from the hood of the station wagon to the first-floor rain gutter, moving hand-over-hand to the nearest balcony. He swung up and over with practised, fluid movements, and in seconds was on the roof. This time there was no hesitation, as there had been the night of the birthday party. He scaled the steep incline with cat-like speed, and dropped noiselessly down onto the balcony deck outside the office. He fell in a resilient crouch. Below him, O'Brien and Joanna were talking. Out on the beach, Tiara began jogging.

He slipped the lock, left the glass door ajar, and in seconds was operating the computer. He plugged Matthews' desk phone into a phone link and punched in KITT's code after

getting an outside line. The monitor hummed, waiting for instructions. Into the computer he tapped the code Michael had given him, the numbers that would dump all data into KITT's waiting memory banks in seconds.

The screen displayed an all-clear. He punched the TRANSMIT key just as the bookcase concealing the videotape surveillance equipment swung open by itself. He tensed.

Elton Matthews stepped into the room from the tiny niche, behind a humungous .44 calibre Auto Mag pistol. He was smiling and shaking his head, like a history teacher who has heard the student's tale of the homework-eating dog once too often. 'You could transmit those data banks for days and not find what you're looking for,' he said. 'What a feeble attempt. Replace the phone in the cradle, and put your hands in the air, or I'll spread you all over this room.'

*'Incoming transmission, Michael,'* said KITT.

'Hot dog, I think the boy did it!'

*'It will take me a moment to correlate this data, but here's something I can display immediately.'*

The number two monitor blinked to life with a twisting, turning diagram overlain on a topographical map of the mountain where Michael had observed the scoop loader at work. The subheading of the printout was BOCA FILE.

'Bingo!' he exclaimed. 'This shows exactly where the Snake-tunnel leads – right into the heart of the mountain, right up to the back door of a weapons dump the government won't even admit exists!'

The evidence of the display was damning. In the centre of the mountain was a circular, multi-storied installation, denoted COBRA PROJECT H.Q.

'Give me playback on O'Brien's stolen Defence Department papers regarding Cobra Project,' said Michael.

Screen number one came on, rolling up the sum of the information in the Defence Department papers and Matthews' computer log:

PROJECT DESIGNATION EQUALS 'COBRA' BREAK 'COBRA PROJECT' EQUALS FULL  
CODING BREAK 'COBRA PROJECT' EQUALS EXPERIMENTAL WEAPONS SYSTEMS  
RESEARCH/DEVELOPMENT AS PROVIDED FOR BY GOV'T FUNDING REFERENCED  
AS NAT'L SECURITY DISBURSEMENTS BREAK  
SEE FILE 344453-9982B-BBXTY-DEFENCE DEPT BREAK

WARNING! BREAK SEE THIS

THIS FILE IS CLASSIFIED TOP SECRET/RED SLASH/EYES ONLY SECURITY N-  
CODE CLEARANCE REQUIRED EXAMINATION BY UNAUTHORISED PERSONS  
SUBJECT TO FINES AND IMPRISONMENT BREAK  
'COBRA PROJECT' FILE CONCLUDES BREAK

'Cobra Project,' said Michael. 'The Mouth of the Snake. And O'Brien and Matthews are about to roll in there with an empty C-130 and take everything. They're going to clean out a secret government weapons dump using the government's own state-of-the-art Stiletto missiles. And they're going to do it in about two hours.'

*'Sounds distressing,'* opined KITT. *'What are we going to do, Michael?'*

'Are you familiar with the uses of the boomerang?' said O'Brien to Joanna. 'It was developed by Australian aborigines centuries before the English invaded their island. They called it the *baja dara* – "stick of life." So saying, he hurled the weapon toward the sea. It flew in its peculiar wobbling spin until Joanna had a hard time actually seeing it. "Stick of life," naturally, for what it provided for the hunter – pure subsistence, life at its most vital.'

With a speed and suddenness that surprised her, O'Brien's hand snapped into the air and caught the boomerang as it came whistling back at top speed.

'There you have it,' he said, like an emcee of some bizarre stage show. 'The only time it doesn't come back . . . is when it gets something for you, and the walk to retrieve it is justified.'

'When it gains you some "life,"' Joanna said, chewing up some canapes and wishing she could get the hell away from Eduardo O'Brien.

'Now this,' O'Brien continued proudly, hefting a vicious-looking carbon-steel crossbow. 'The longbow was credited with revolutionising warfare. But when the crossbow was introduced in the early thirteenth century, it revolutionised bow-and-arrow warfare, making killing even more efficient.' Muscles straining, he cocked the mechanism and laid in a wickedly short and barbed crossbow bolt.

Before he could shoot it at something, Joanna interposed, 'Eduardo, did you bring me here for a child's primer on medieval weaponry? This is getting quite dull.'

'Ah, boredom is to be avoided at all costs,' he said, gesturing past her with the crossbow. 'This is why I invited you.'

David Dalton walked carefully out, held at gunpoint by Elton Matthews. He said nothing, and begged her with his eyes not to speak, not to make things worse.

‘Despite the ineptitude of your amateur sleuthing,’ O’Brien went on, as though he had been lecturing, ‘Elton and I have conceived quite an elegant conclusion to your sordid little plot against our . . . business interests.’

Joanna spotted a quiver of bolts for the crossbow leaning against the balcony rail. Each bolt featured a ring of gold near the centre of the shaft, an O’Brien trademark.

‘Be assured of several things. Elton’s gun is a monster. A single shot at this range would literally blow you apart. So please, Mr Dalton – no extravagant kung-fu theatrics.’

‘It would be worth it to take you down,’ David said, hate glimmering in his eyes.

O’Brien exposed his gold teeth in a nasty smile. ‘Oh, if you cause any trouble, I won’t have Elton shoot *you*,’ he said. ‘He will stick the gun in Joanna’s mouth and pull the trigger.’ He set the crossbow down, safety on, and picked up the boomerang. ‘Now, attend please, while I demonstrate the retaliation I visit on those who are treacherous to me.’

He sighted on the jogging form of Tiara, on the beach, and snapped the boomerang aloft, following through with his body.

David could not remain mute. ‘*Tiara!*’ he shouted. ‘*Look ou – !*’

Her distant figure stopped and turned toward the balcony. Then the aboriginal weapon struck her head-high, breaking her neck like a pencil shaft. She collapsed in a horribly loose sprawl, as though her bones no longer connected, and was still. The ocean roared on, throwing breakers at the beach. Foaming surf-water pooled around her, and toyed with her long black hair.

‘As I noted,’ O’Brien said. ‘When it gets something for you it does not come back.’

Joanna averted her eyes. David bristled, but the threat of Matthews’ Magnum kept him immobile. In a horrible way, his promise of last night to Tiara had been fulfilled – she had shown him how to defeat Matthews’ security system . . . and now Eduardo O’Brien would never touch her again.

‘You’re a lunatic, O’Brien,’ David breathed. ‘You’re as crazy as a dung fly caught in a wind tunnel.’ The thought that his attempt to save Tiara by shouting had caused her to stop right in the path of the boomerang also hurt, because David knew O’Brien had predicted his actions, and accounted for them. The abruptness of her death did not shock David, who was used to things sudden and lethal, but the uselessness of it offended his warrior sensibility. O’Brien was not a fighter, but a simple butcher. ‘But then, for a madman and a murderer you aren’t

doing so bad.'

'Juvenile invective,' said O'Brien pompously. 'Elton, how much time do we have?'

'Quarter of an hour,' the man with the gun replied.

O'Brien strapped on the quiver of crossbow bolts. 'You have caused me considerable annoyance with your meddling,' he said to the helpless David. 'You've trespassed on my grounds, stolen from me, embarrassed me, and tried to appropriate my woman.'

'I'm not *your woman*, you hog,' spat Joanna.

Still grinning, O'Brien backhanded her savagely across the face, knocking her to her knees and leaving red welts on her left cheek. 'She will pay later, when I have much time to make her pay. You I shall deal with right now. Out of the goodness of my heart and my vast sense of sportsmanship, I grant you sixty seconds. You may either run for the beach, or run for the wooded tract on the other side of the coast highway from this house . . . but run you shall.'

'What're you talking about?'

'You have devoted a great deal of time to training, David. I wish to discover if you are as good as you think you are, and what it is in you that attracts this woman to you over me. If you'd like to watch the sun go down this evening, run. Run and abandon the woman like a coward. Run into the woods like a frightened rabbit. Run, now. You have only fifty seconds left. Run.'

'You crazy -'

'If I were you I'd be more concerned with my aim than my sanity. Forty seconds.'

'Run, David!' Joanna pleaded. 'Don't worry about what he says! Just get out of here!'

'Joanna, I -'

'Do it for me, David! Go! Go now!'

'Thirty seconds,' said O'Brien. 'Your life-time is trickling away.'

With a glance of regret, mingled with a desperate kind of hope, David dived headlong over the balcony rail, tuck-and-rolled on the sand, and came to his feet running.

'David, I love you!' Joanna shouted after him.

'Coward!' yelled O'Brien, enormously pleased with himself. 'Run for your life!'

Matthews chuckled. 'That boy doesn't have a chance. This is one of Eduardo's favourite games.'

'And I always win,' he said, picking up the crossbow and stepping over the rail.

'Wait!' cried Joanna. 'You said thirty seconds!'

‘Dear Joanna, when will you ever learn about hunting?’ he lamented. ‘I lied. Elton, take her out front. And set loose the hunting dogs.’

## Chapter 12

Jonas smelled fresh blood.

As dogs go, Jonas had a below-par intellect, even taking into account that he was a Rottweiler, a snappish one, and ageing. ‘Intellect’ was an inaccurate term for it; rather, it was the stimulation in his canine system prompted by a match-up of emotional resonances in his dog-brain. Without understanding why, Jonas filled with the kill-instinct at the whiff of David Dalton’s blood. The match-up was that David had caused him pain recently (though that remained in Jonas’ brain as nothing more than a vestigial sensation), and now the dog had been given an opportunity to repay the favour.

When considered in profile, Jonas actually had quite a lot in common with Eduardo O’Brien, who was physiologically ill-equipped to smell blood, but who behaved as if the odour could send him into the same kind of canine frenzy. The hot glint in O’Brien’s golden eyes, and Jonas’ deep-brown ones, was the same. A lust for death.

David Dalton had ripped his palm open in vaulting over the balcony rail at the beach house; lancets of pain stung his left hand, and he felt the red wetness oozing between the fingers of his tightly-shut fist. Jonas had caught the scent immediately. He did not have to look to know Jonas and another Rottweiler were burning up the trail behind him, and that in their wake was O’Brien, madder than any ten rabid dogs, lugging the crossbow – another of the archaic killing devices he so loved.

Up on the highway, where wasn’t a single car for a dozen miles in either direction. David cursed his luck and moved quickly across the road.

On the opposite side of the beach house estate, Michael Knight waited with KITT . . . but there was no way for David to signal for a rescue. His own rental car was equally out of reach, and Joanna was under Elton Matthews’ huge Magnum back on the sun deck. No, he thought, willing away the pain from his bleeding hand, all I have is my abilities . . . and the woods in front of me.

A black crossbow bolt hissed through the air and sank into the trunk of the nearest trees with a hollow *thunk*.



'Not fast enough, boy!' O'Brien raved from the other side of the highway, cocking back the firing mechanism and inserting another of his gold-banded bolts from the quiver. The dogs bounded across the pavement.

He's totally out of his mind, thought David. He's high on the prospect of murdering me.

The wooded tract was growing denser. David kept running. Then, as soon as he was sure his hunter's sightlines would be confused, he dived into the trees at a tangent. Throwing the dogs off scent would be a little harder.

'Sit down, Ms St John,' Matthews said civilly, pointing toward a chaise-longue with the *Auto Mag*. 'Eduardo won't keep us waiting long.'

'He's as crazy as a mudfly, Elton,' she said as she sat. 'You realise that, don't you? One day he'll turn on you. He's already like those slaving dogs of his.'

'There could be a grain of truth in what you say,' he responded, looking back dispassionately to the prostrate form of the dead Tiara, still on the beach, the incoming tide stirring her arms and legs limply. 'But don't delude yourself that it matters. I'm a businessman. People tend to overlook the fact that Eduardo and I are *equal* partners. It's a mutually parasitic relationship, but we both acknowledge that. We each get what we want.'

'What's his interest in *Boca Culebra*? Certainly not the money.'

'I'm not sure,' Matthews laughed. The wind stirred his styled white hair. 'I think Eduardo wants to get a Latin American country all to himself, be some kind of tinhorn dictator. He's always been into gun-running, like the *Vatos Locos*, or the *Corazones de Piedras*. But with him, it's more. I really believe he wants to take all this high-tech government weaponry down there and carve out a little chunk of the continent for himself. As for me –'

'You're only in this for profit,' she said, having pegged Matthews' personality instantly. 'The money is all you care about.' She knew his type well; Matthews was nothing if not a consummate capitalist, pinky ring and all. 'While O'Brien . . . it's like he saw a rerun of *The Most Dangerous Game* on TV when he was a kid, and it really went to his head.'

'Eduardo has hunted many men. He always wins.'

'Only because he cheats,' she said with contempt, recalling how he had promised David a head start, then reneged.

'My dear – what do you think capitalism is all about?'

Joanna chose to ignore that one. 'Okay, genius – what is going to happen to me?'

Matthews shrugged. It truly did not interest him, having nothing to do with profit. 'Who

can say?’ He gestured vaguely toward the dead Tiara, and that was all the answer Joanna needed.

*‘David is definitely overdue,’* noted KITT.

‘Then we have to assume he got in a jam,’ said Michael. ‘Since we got him into this, let’s go get him out.’

*‘Michael, barging in on the occupants of the beach house will do neither of us any good if David and Ms St John are already captured or worse.’* KITT seemed queasy about jumping into jeopardy while Michael was itching for action. Maybe the car feared the rocket launcher more than Michael did.

‘KITT, we really don’t have a choice. The C-130 is already on its way. *Boca Culebra* happens as soon as the plane arrives. The only components not at the weapons dump are Matthews and O’Brien . . . and they’re here.’

*‘It would seem logical to conjecture that they have secured highspeed transport to the site, and said transport will conduct them there shortly. So, I repeat, why are we hanging around here?’*

‘Because I want to find out if David and Joanna are still alive, old buddy.’ He punched the drive keyboard to MANUAL. ‘Let’s go.’

The wooded tract was simply too sparse to offer any kind of good chase. The foliage was too thin; everything was too near the ocean, and rooting conditions suffered from the permeation of salt in the soil from the seawater. David thought that his best course of action might lie in circling back to the beach house. But the dogs were too fast, O’Brien was too charged up, and there was no time to think. He could elude O’Brien’s sightline with ease . . . but not the sense of smell of the Rottweilers.

David stopped running, and turned to confront the onward-charging dogs. They were perhaps thirty yards behind him, galloping and snarling, when O’Brien appeared in the distance, striking an aiming pose and sighting his crossbow.

David stood in a relaxed T’ai Chi stance, letting the Rottweilers come.

They leapt into the air, growling, as O’Brien fired another bolt.

David pivoted like an oiled hinge, planting a flat-handed blow to the side of the lead dog’s skull as it flew toward him. The dog spun in the air as though kicked, landed and skidded bonelessly, knocked senseless. David hated having to harm any animal, even if only to prevent himself from being killed.

Jonas leapt to the side, missing completely thanks to the trajectory of the first dog. As David spun to tap the grounded dog delicately with the toe of his boot – ensuring that it was down for the count without really hurting it – O’Brien’s bolt thudded into the tree behind where he had been standing seconds before.

Jonas touched down in a scrabble of paws and claws and turned to lunge again. Trained in attack moves, its hindquarters rippled and it sprang at David, jaws levering open to tear his throat to tatters. As it jumped, David moved into position and caught Jonas’ own throat in his hands, stopping the dog’s nose inches from his own. The Rottweiler’s eyes were glazed with hate, and its breath smelled like rotten pork.

David’s injured hand stung as he grabbed the charging dog. He could hold the squirming, wild creature for a few seconds at most.

Then Jonas emitted an ear-piercing yelp and went limp in David’s grasp.

A gold-banded crossbow shaft protruded from the dog’s neck on a target line with David’s own throat.

David dropped Jonas and saw O’Brien, reloading. He ducked past another tree and began to make his way back toward the beach house.

*‘Michael, I’m registering a Bell jet helicopter on an approach path from the north-northwest,’* reported KITT. *‘Apart from the pilot there are no occupants.’*

*‘That’s O’Brien’s transport to Boca Culebra,’* shouted Michael over the wind speed-whipping through the open car windows.

*‘It appears to be headed for the beach area just beyond the sun deck of the beach house. It is equipped with sand skids.’*

*‘Then let’s get down there, pronto – before O’Brien climbs aboard and flies out of our lives!’*

The crimson digits of the speedometer jumped to 100, and KITT went airborne over the first hump in the beach road.

Matthews sighted the approaching helicopter through a pair of high-powered binoculars – the same ones Tiara had used for her night-time surveillance of David from the parking lot of the Miramar hotel.

*‘Temple is early. Looks like Eduardo’s hunting party has got to be postponed.’* It was clear from Matthews’ tone that he would not permit *Boca Culebra* to be delayed merely to satiate

O'Brien's bloodlust with a disposable nuisance like David.

Joanna mentally crossed her fingers, hoping David had evaded the mad hunter and his dogs.

The chopper came in low, from the ocean side. The prop wash blew flecks of ocean foam off Tiara D'Arcy's corpse, then kicked up sand in spiral clouds as it hovered and set down forty yards or so from the sun deck, midway between the beach house and sea.

'Come with me, Ms St John,' Matthews said, again waving the gun. 'And please – no funny business; no heroics. I'm a dead shot with this thing, and I no longer have time for melodramatics.'

Meekly, she allowed herself to be led to the waiting whirlybird. Matthews motioned her to a rear seat, then leaned into the cockpit and unclipped a hand mike from the instrument panel. The speeded-out Temple was doubling as pilot, an insulated pair of fat headphones cutting him off from the racket stirred up by the revolving blades. He saw Matthews' intent, and reached to the panel to switch on the chopper's PA bullhorn.

When he spoke, his voice blasted out, muting even the ocean's roar: 'Eduardo! The chopper is here . . . repeat . . . the chopper has arrived. Get back here immediately or we leave without you. Repeat: we're leaving now, pronto!'

He pointed at the watch O'Brien had given him, signalling to Temple that they would wait two minutes – no more – for O'Brien, and then lift off. The rendezvous with the C-130 and the assault on the weapons dump could not wait.

When David crashed out of the woods and regained the eastern edge of the highway, his downward view of the beach house area told him all he needed to know. As his right foot touched the paved surface, another of O'Brien's gold-banded bolts perforated a speed limit sign a foot behind him, letting daylight through the centre of the black 55. He dived and rolled across the two lanes and came up running. His left fist was nearly cemented shut with caked blood. To the far left, he saw KITT's approaching dust trail; below, the idling helicopter.

It took O'Brien an average of ten seconds to cock and reload the crossbow. David estimated that a flat-out run for the beach house would cost him fifteen seconds; seventeen on the outside.

Stopping to weigh odds might cost him his life. Without hesitating, he ran, trusting in his acrobatic ability to spring him clear of the single shot O'Brien might cut loose at him in the

open area between the highway and the beach house.

He was still running full-tilt when O'Brien appeared on the highway and fired directly at his back.

*'There they are, Michael – David and Eduardo O'Brien,'* KITT said as they jounced over another hummock in the road. *'It appears David is in a spot of trouble.'* 'Spot of trouble,' Michael knew, was one of the phrases KITT happened to have assimilated from Devon Miles.

'Zoom up on visual, KITT – let me see what's going on down there!'

An image lit up the number two screen just as David hit the fence surrounding the beach house, and O'Brien unleashed a deadly crossbow bolt at his prey. Again, Michael marvelled at David's sheer physical ability. He knew that he could not slow down and dodge the bolt at the same time, so he converted his momentum into a flying kick, and literally punched his way through the fence just as the bolt thwanged into a support post inches from his left shoulder.

*'An amazing physical feat,'* observed KITT.

David had disappeared into the house; O'Brien was already at the ragged hole kicked in the fence. He hesitated, then, with something like bitter regret, ran around to where the chopper was waiting.

'KITT – are we close enough to stop the chopper engine with the microwave jammers?'

*'I'm afraid Mr O'Brien has anticipated just such interference, Michael,'* KITT said dolefully. *'The vital parts of the helicopter's motive mechanism have been carefully shielded against microwave jamming.'*

Michael smacked the steering wheel. 'Blast! He sure learned a lot from dabbling in all those high-tech gadgets!'

*'Apparently, yes.'*

'Okay, top speed, then. Let's stop that chopper before it lifts off!'

*'You mean ram it, Michael?'*

Michael set his mouth in a grimace. 'Yeah. If we have to, we'll ram that sucker.'

There wasn't a weapon to be found inside the beach house; David did not bother searching for one anyway. When O'Brien came through the door, he planned to take him out using only his hands and his skill – then he could deal with Matthews and the 'copter, perhaps help Joanna . . .

But O'Brien never came through the door. David ran out to the sundeck just as O'Brien

rounded the house, and headed for the chopper. O'Brien saw him emerge and stopped just long enough to fire another bolt. It sizzled toward David and destroyed the buffet arrangement on the food-serving table. Dishes and canapes flew into the air and David hit the deck instinctively.

O'Brien was shaking his fist like a *Perils of Pauline* villain, livid with anger. 'I'll be back for you one day, boy! You'll not escape my crosshairs twice, *do you hear me?*' The gold chains around his neck glittered as he hung half-in, half-out of the helicopter.

The rest of his utterance was obliterated by the chaos caused when Michael took the most direct route down from the highway where David and O'Brien had crossed. KITT sped through the sand lightfootedly, locking down the governors while engaging the All-Terrain mode. When they hit the driveway, they augured past the parked station wagon, skewing it sideways and denting the fenders into the wheels to make it useless, took out fifteen feet of fencing, and emerged from the south wing of the structure ten feet to David's left, on the sundeck. Broken furniture tumbled in mid-air as KITT's alloy prow penetrated the wall and ploughed headlong toward the helicopter.

Temple saw the oncoming car and lifted off before a collision could take place. O'Brien, not fully inside, had to grab wildly for the door handle to keep from falling off his perch on the starboard runner. He dropped his beloved crossbow as the 'copter tilted upward, taking to the air.

Michael flinched as the metal weapon bounced off KITT's high-impact windshield right in front of his face. It spun in the air and fell into the sand.

David caught up with them, and together they watched the helicopter whiz quickly away to the east. In no time it diminished to a speck. Then it was no longer visible.

Michael keyed down the driver's-side window. 'Looks like everybody was five seconds too late.'

David grimaced, clutching his injured hand. 'We blew it. My resources, the Foundation's, you, me, KITT . . . we couldn't beat O'Brien.'

'KITT, give me a visual on the 'copter.'

'Already out of scanning range, Michael.'

'David – get in. There's a first aid kit on the rear deck.' David obediently climbed into the car, humbled with thoughts of what torments O'Brien would make Joanna suffer before he got around to killing her. Before he closed the passenger-side door, he lifted O'Brien's lost crossbow from the sand. A bolt was still locked into the firing position. He placed it in KITT's

backseat.

‘Get us back to the highway, KITT, and lay out a visual on *Boca Culebra*—calculate the quickest surface route.’ As the car moved toward the road, Michael helped David dress and bandage his hand. ‘KITT, can we at least give them a race? If we head for them at top speed?’

*‘Michael, I’d like to take this opportunity to point out that, while I am capable of cruising speeds in excess of 150 mph, I have never maintained a speed higher than that for a length of time sufficient to log results that would stand up to statistical evaluation.’*

‘Hey, that’s right,’ he said, mostly to David, who looked confused. ‘We don’t really know what your top end is, do we, old buddy?’

David looked at the readout on the Super Dash. ‘You mean you don’t know how fast this thing can really go?’

‘I’ll bet we could surprise them – they’d never expect us to equal their airspeed,’ Michael said with dawning enthusiasm.

*‘Michael,’ KITT put in cautiously. ‘Permit me to warn you that although I may very well prove capable of sustaining 200-plus mph speeds, there is a chance we might do damage to the Lambda circuitry and burn out –’*

‘Push it as high as it’ll go, KITT. Let’s find out.’

*‘Michael . . .’* KITT was not thrilled.

‘That’s an order, old buddy.’

‘They’ve got Joanna,’ said David. ‘If there’s any chance of saving her, KITT, I’ll replace anything you burn up. I mean it. I’ll get you all-gold wiring, melted down from O’Brien’s junk jewellery.’

The red neon digits of the speedometer climbed as they picked up speed on the highway. The readout jumped from 60 to 100, from 100 to 130, from 130 to 170 . . .

David braced himself against his seat. ‘Uh – Michael? How fast *does* this thing go . . .?’

‘Relax and hang on tight,’ Michael said. ‘You’re about to find out along with me.’ The accumulation of numbers slowed but kept climbing as the car whipped along the road: 180 . . . 187 . . . 192 . . . 201 . . . He looked back to the increasingly nervous David, who had never gone this fast before, except perhaps in a commercial jetliner. ‘I expected you to pull some crazy Ninja-like stunt,’ he said. ‘Like leaping up and hanging off the runner of the ‘copter till it got to *Boca Culebra*.’

David tried to appear unconcerned with their acceleration, but glanced over and saw the glowing gauge at 225 and climbing. ‘Er–yeah. I did. Think about it, I mean.’ He wiped his lips.

'Except that, in a chopper that small, the pilot would feel the weight difference right away—it would cost them fuel, and cause the chopper to rock like a boat. All anybody inside would have to do to spot me would be to look down—and there I'd be, a sitting duck. Matthews would lean out and blow my head off while I was fighting the rotor vibration just trying to hang on. That kind of stunt is strictly for the movies.'

'Speaking of which, you'd better fasten your seat belt,' said Michael as he did the same.

*'Michael, I don't know if my microprocessing units can handle this sort of heavy vibration for long,'* said KITT.

Michael watched all the readouts. 'Just grit your teeth and get us there, old buddy.'

The speedometer hit 249, then jumped to 255.



## Chapter 13

The tractor-trailer rig housing the Stiletto missile launcher was waiting at *Boca Culebra* when the helicopter touched down in the middle of the desert. Beyond the tunnelling operation<sup>7</sup> was the mountain concealing the weapons dump – O'Brien's primary target.

O'Brien, Matthews, Temple and Joanna all disembarked. O'Brien climbed into the rear of the truck, untarpaulined the rocket launcher, and handed Matthews a portable FM unit while Temple kept all his attention on Joanna. Everyone synchronised their watches.

'Assemble your attack squad at the mouth of the tunnel!' O'Brien barked, the sun showing through his hair, making it seem golden. 'On my order, advance into the tunnel.' He turned to the man seated in the operator saddle of the Stiletto. 'Fully loaded?'

The man indicated the huge revolving drum of the launcher, and the neat pyramids of waiting missiles stacked in the rear of the trailer box, and the two-man reloading crew, who already had the first new rocket waiting in a winch-and-sling contraption that ran in a metal track along the roof of the box. 'Waiting for your orders, Mr O'Brien.'

O'Brien lowered binoculars from his eyes, and without taking his sight from his objective, said, 'Three rockets. One-degree tangents off ninety-one degrees. Let's bring the moles to the surface. Computerise the coordinates of the bridge back there on the road; I want it knocked out next.'

While the man punched in coordinates on the Stiletto targeting computer, Joanna shouted, 'Eduardo, no!'

Irritated at this distraction from the soon-to-be fruition of his master plan, O'Brien slapped her again, causing her to bite her lip and draw dots of blood. 'Temple, secure this young lady in the truck cab. I want no further disturbances.' Temple yessir<sup>ed</sup> and clamped a hammy hand around Joanna's forearm, leading her away at gunpoint.

He had just closed the cab door when O'Brien put the glasses back to his eyes and said, 'Fire.' He said it very softly.

The technician depressed the square red button and the Stiletto loosed its first missile with a *whoosh* of compressed air. Twenty yards from the launching tube, the rockets cut in

with a roar, and the Stiletto accelerated away in a flash of yellow flame.

A ton or so of earth coughed from the mountainside in a napalm-strewn blast; it looked as though some giant had kicked the mountain hard from the opposite side. Flaming debris rained down, touching off the scrub and foliage on the flank of the mountain.

O'Brien smiled, causing his golden teeth to glimmer. 'Fire two.'

A hiss, an ignition, and another gout of the mountain blew skyward. Now the entire north face of the mountain seemed to be in flames.

'Fire three.' There came another violent detonation. 'Start moving your troops down the tunnel,' he said to Matthews. He knew that inside the secret weapons dump men were shouting and grabbing weapons; alarms were probably buzzing. They would come out to fight while Matthews' men sneaked in the back door to mop up.

'Eduardo, look!' shouted Matthews, staring into a second pair of binocs.

O'Brien traced his partner's line of sight down to the access road, just beyond the bridge. Michael Knight's sleek black car was approaching *Boca Culebra* at an impossibly high speed. Matthews goggled.

O'Brien kept cool. 'Blow the bridge,' he ordered the technician. 'Now.'

David shook his head wonderingly. 'I am truly floored,' was all he could say, and he had repeated himself several times during their extremely quick trip in KITT. 'Two hundred and sixty-two miles per hour without a body rattle. Absolutely incredible.'

Over the sheer roaring noise of their speeding progress, Michael shouted, 'That's American craftsmanship for you, right, KITT?'

*'I feel distinctly ill,'* was the car's response. *'I estimate I can maintain this speed for a maximum of five more minutes before heaven knows what wears out ...'*

'We don't need five more minutes, buddy – we're there.'

In seconds they took in the flaming mountainside, and the commandos moving into the Boca Culebra tunnel, and O'Brien, perched on the tailgate of the trailer, directing the action. David's gaze did not linger on his enemy; he wanted to know where Joanna was.

*'Michael, can I decelerate now? Please?'*

Michael was about to say sure thing when the machine interrupted him.

*'Michael! I've picked up an incoming Stiletto missile – range point-zero-five miles – trajectory –'*  
'Yeah?'

*'The target is the bridge ahead of us. I estimate the explosion will eliminate approximately*

*seventy feet of road surface. If we decelerate, we won't be able to jump across the chasm, even using TURBO BOOST.'*

'What's he talking about?' yelled David.

'We're driving right into a missile detonation,' said Michael. 'If we slow down, we won't be able to jump across the hole the Stiletto will blow in the bridge – not enough momentum. And if we speed up, we'll catch the Stiletto right on the roof . . . and even KITT couldn't survive a direct hit.' Still barelling toward the bridge at 262 mph, he added, 'KITT, engage TURBO BOOST function on automatic when the bridge blows – it should happen right before our eyes!'

David was treated to the unreal sight of actually seeing the missile descend toward the bridge in front of them, like a slow meteor or a movie special effect. It did not seem real.

Then the centre of the bridge blew completely apart, obliterating KITT in a rolling cloud of flaming debris and dense black smoke.

'Bullseye,' smiled O'Brien smugly. Then the grin dropped from his face as though it had been slapped off.

The black street machine was airborne, jumping right across the canyon that now yawned in the middle of the bridge, bursting through the black-orange fireball of the explosion like another kind of missile. The car had somehow taken to the air just as the bridge was blown out from beneath it.

Eduardo dropped the binocs from his eyes. His gold skin tone flushed to angry scarlet, and the veins on his neck jumped out with rage. 'Triangulate on the road!' he shouted. 'Bomb them! Fire! Fire! Fire!'

At the mouth of the tunnel, Matthews looked back. He had realised something had just gone awry.

Another Stiletto hissed down, punching a hole twenty feet deep into the centre of the roadway. KITT turbo-boosted over it with the ease of a child leap-frogging over a mud puddle.

The technician centred his electronic crosshairs directly on KITT's roof and fired as the sweating reload crew kept the multiple bores of the launcher full. The Stiletto *whooshed* out, flamed on . . . and at the last possible second KITT swerved from the road, still travelling at 200-plus mph, leaving the ugly orange mushroom cloud of the Stiletto detonation in its wake.

'All right, we wait!' shouted O'Brien. 'We wait until we can't miss – until they're right in

front of us. Then we'll blow them to kingdom come and back!' He snapped at the technician: "What're you looking at! Fire on that hill, shell them with impunity until there is nothing left but rubble!"

Joanna made her move.

Temple had been momentarily distracted, watching the brilliant explosions of the Stiletto missiles in the wide rear-view mirrors of the truck cab. She had come to several conclusions regarding the truck: first, if it contained the rocket launcher, it must be shielded to be more impenetrable than an ordinary truck. Whatever protection afforded the trailer must, of necessity, she thought, go double for the driver of the truck. That implied that the cab shell and windows had to be armoured – plate shielding, bulletproof glass. This last was crucial to her plan. At the same time, if she failed, they would all be dead shortly anyway.

Also important was the fact that while Temple was an adept chopper pilot, he didn't know his way around a semi. He'd had to search for the door handle before buttoning her up. Joanna had her eye on the driver's side door handle, just past Temple's left thigh.

*Wait until the next explosion gets his attention.* That was a morbid thought, considering that the next blast might signify Michael and David being vaporised.

*Boom!* Another Stiletto had failed to strike KITT and had blown a crater in the scrubland. Temple's eyes reflected the flash of impact, pupils dilating from the light.

Like a striking snake, Joanna darted over and in a single smooth motion, jacked Temple's door open and shoved him out of the cab. He yelped and fell on his head in the dirt.

His gun was already out, thanks to his chemically enhanced reaction time. She slammed the door and locked it. He yelled for her to open the door once, then started firing. The lead slugs splattered against the glass, making milky cobwebs, obscuring all view of Temple through the window . . . but not penetrating. Joanna knew she had to move quickly.

She slid over to the driver's side – she could not help a small, scared cry of her own, each time a heavy bullet flattened out against the window – and disengaged the truck's microbrake. With a hiss of hydraulics, she shifted to neutral.

With arthritic slowness the truck began to roll backward, down the hill, toward the road on which KITT was eating up the final few hundred yards of distance.

Temple kept pulling his trigger even though his pistol was empty. He jumped on the cab runner and began pounding on the glass. It wouldn't shatter.

Elton Matthews began to run back from the mouth of the tunnel, waving a machine gun.

The speedometer told Joanna they were slouching along at about ten miles per hour. That was enough, she thought. With all her strength, she cranked the wheel hard right.

The trailer box skewed to the left. There was a delicious, slow-motion moment of inertia . . . and then the truck, trailer and all, fell over onto its side like a dinosaur hit with a bazooka shell.

David and Michael saw it happen as they screeched into the clearing, KITT slamming from two hundred mph to zero in two seconds of bone-wrenching panic stop. They had to skid left to avoid hitting the oncoming trailer box, which had snapped from its truck moorings and was sliding down the hill toward them like a coffin on a water-slide.

‘Geronimo!’ David shouted triumphantly.

O’Brien had leaped from the box as it began to tilt; the last they saw of him was his yellow and gold clothing, rolling end-over-end away from them on another slope of the hill.

‘He’s mine!’ said David, kicking open his door.

‘David, wait!’ Michael shouted, just as he spotted Matthews, legs wide apart to balance him on the slope, as he sprayed KITT with machinegun fire from an Uzi.

David ducked and vanished in his peculiar commando way. Uzi slugs skimmed off KITT’s alloy hide, making spark trails on the hood and glass. When Matthews saw his bullets fail to impede the car, he turned tail and ran. Michael remembered that the helicopter must be docked somewhere close, just out of sight, and that Matthews and O’Brien would not be so dumb as to not provide an escape contingency.

KITT’s microwave jammers would not stop the chopper – Matthews had provided for that. Michael grabbed O’Brien’s crossbow from the back seat and jumped from the car.

The truck had ceased its downward slide. The tubes of the Stiletto were all choked up with fill dirt, and the technicians and loaders had all fled in panic. When Michael saw the cab door get kicked open – upward – from within, he brought the crossbow to bear on the figure that emerged. The fall of the truck had flung the cab free, to flip over and smash down hard, compressing the driver’s side to junk.

It was Joanna. There was blood on her forehead from the broken rearview mirror she had struck when the cab somersaulted.

Michael ran over to help her down. As he reached for her, he stepped on something soft and realised it was a human hand – Temple’s, buried beneath the crushed side of the cab. He had hung on while the cab flipped. Michael lifted his foot and the fingers slowly drew

together in death.

‘Joanna!’ he shouted, realising there was little time. ‘Where’s the chopper?’

She wiped her eyes, smearing blood and dirt. She looked like a commando from Beverly Hills, her blouse torn open to reveal the bikini she’d put on back at the beach house, seemingly a million years ago. ‘On the other side of that ridge.’ She pointed, then looked quizzically at the crossbow.

‘I’m going bird-hunting,’ he said. ‘Get back to KITT. Have KITT call Devon, and have Devon call General Maddux – got it? – General Maddux. Tell him we need paratroops to drop in and mop up the commandos in the tunnel, and a fighter scramble to keep that C-130 from landing! I’m going after Matthews!’ As he ran up the hill in pursuit of the white-haired businessman, Joanna said, ‘But where’s David?’

Nobody heard her.

O’Brien proceeded quickly but warily up the hill toward the ridge, moving in a pattern almost parallel to that taken by Matthews, but on the opposite side of the incline. He was so busy looking behind himself that he was caught off guard when David Dalton dropped out of the trees directly in front of him.

O’Brien started, then relaxed. ‘I see you’ve caught up with me,’ he said in his usual oily tone. ‘Are you that eager to die?’

‘It’s over, Eduardo,’ David said. ‘It ends here.’

‘I agree with you.’ He reached around to the small of his back and withdrew a Randall killing knife, the kind manufactured for Special Forces troops, also dubbed a ‘survival knife’. It had the characteristic O’Brien band of real gold encircling the haft. ‘It ends here. For you, it ends. I killed my first man with a knife like this one – I shall kill many more after I have killed you, boy.’

O’Brien lunged, blade-first. The steel glittered with sunlight, all ten deadly inches of it. All the gold O’Brien was wearing seemed to radiate his lust to kill in hard amber light. Blood fury stirred the golden flecks in his eyes.

David fainted automatically, batting the knife hand away with his bandaged hand, ducking and wheel-kicking O’Brien in the stomach. The golden assassin doubled up but did not fall down. He spun in a perfect follow-through, slicing the air in front of David’s nose just as David yanked his own head backward. In the spare second of time he punched O’Brien hard in the jaw. Threads of blood crept between the golden man’s teeth, staining the yellow

metal there.

O'Brien grinned, making an oncoming motion with his hands, imploring David to attack rashly, and be quickly killed. David danced around him, looking for an opening. O'Brien struck; David bobbed and went headlong into the golden man's fist because he had been watching the knife blade too closely.

Fury engulfed David – he was fighting with the disadvantage of trying to take O'Brien alive, while the golden assassin fought uninhibitedly; he was fighting *himself* as well as O'Brien, and that meant he would lose because of his precious codes and the warrior ethic. Ultimately, he thought, what had more value – beating O'Brien once and for all, or adhering to a system O'Brien did not even know about, and die because of it? No one would see the truth.

The blade of the Randall stabbed toward his heart again. He blocked with his left hand, and the keen edge sliced cleanly through the bandage, crossing the first cut, making an X-shape on his palm that quickly welled up with fresh blood. The renewed pain was hard to bear, and David gasped. One hand was nearly useless except as a sort of club, to be waved around and chopped up some more.

David yelled, a sort of primal scream that took O'Brien by surprise. Then he lanced out with a pointed toe and booted the knife out of O'Brien's grasp. It spun and landed in the dirt, the way the throwing knife had landed in the ocean, the first night David had seen Tiara D'Arcy toss it over the rail. David followed through again and kicked his aggressor in the side of the face, putting weight and momentum into the strike. O'Brien took two staggering steps sideways and fell to one knee.

'That's for Tiara,' David muttered. While O'Brien was down he arched, kicking him in the face again, knocking him in the opposite direction. O'Brien coughed blood and fell to his hands and knees in the dirt. 'And that's for Joanna.'

The killer swayed and got wobblingly to his feet, fists automatically going to a boxer's guard. But his golden eyes were glazing over; David had struck him hard, one-two. He punched only the air when he swung.

'And this,' David said to the woozy man, 'this is for yours truly.' He hauled off and gave O'Brien everything he had left, right in the kisser, feeling cartilage and bone crunch as O'Brien's nose flattened out under his fist.

O'Brien's eyeballs rolled skyward, and he fell backward into the dirt, spreadeagling. After that he did not move. David dusted his hands off, heart racing.

Eduardo O'Brien was down for the count.

Matthews saw Michael coming and turned around to give his pursuer another burst from the Uzi. Bullets peppered the trees and rocks as Michael dived for cover, taking care not to impale himself on the crossbow bolt.

Abruptly the firing stopped.

Michael peeked over a rim of rock and saw Matthews knock the empty clip from the machinegun and replace it, fully aware that Michael was out of crossbow range and could be held off indefinitely while the helicopter warmed up. Another burst of slugs made Michael pull his head down while the rotor blades began to crank around, lethargically at first, then faster, until they began to blur.

Matthews fired again and then climbed into the cockpit. It was clear he did not need Temple to fly the bird. The motor whined as the rotor came up to lift-off speed.

Michael worked his way round to the rear of the helicopter. Matthews would be taking off any second; the rotor was now scaring up dust and debris in a wide circle around the machine. Inside, Matthews scanned around, and, satisfied Michael had pulled a retreat, set about his take-off preparations.

The engine and the *whup-whup* of the blades drowned out all else as Michael popped back into sight with the crossbow. He sighted on the 'copter's rotor mount and fired his single shot.

The bolt hit the revolving mount and snapped in two, giving the rotor a slight wobble. In Vietnam, Michael had seen dozens of Huey assault choppers crash because of rotor wobble – the tiny vibration in the shaft that knocks the rotor out of true, causing the enormous force of revolution stress to simply break the shaft in half as the blades turn at high speed. His plan had worked . . . but not enough. The runners of the chopper began to leave the ground.

Michael lobbed the empty crossbow into the spinning tail rotor and dived behind the rocks for cover as it hit.

Mangled by the metal crossbow, the tail rotor – the element of stabilisation for the chopper, as opposed to the bigger overhead rotor, which provided lift – sheared apart into about twenty shrapnel-like hunks of useless, whizzing steel. The crossbow, sliced into an equal number of useless junk parts, was also spewn out as deadly hail. Chunks of ruined steel flew past Michael and stuck into some of the trees going better than ninety miles per hour on impact. With the tail rotor hacked off, the ascending helicopter commenced a helpless lateral



spin, like a runaway carousel with Matthews inside, bouncing off the interior of the cockpit bubble. It came back to earth in a nose-first crash, having ascended perhaps ten feet, spinning still, the tail section mowing down trees and underbrush like a gigantic, swinging scythe. Michael kept his head down.

Finally it came to rest, steaming and hissing, possibly ready to explode, igniting the fuel tanks. Matthews lolled inside like a department store mannequin with too much oil in the joints.

Michael yanked open the bubble door and it came off its hinges. The Uzi sub-machinegun, flying around loose inside the cockpit, had banged against Matthews' forehead and rendered him unconscious. He had not had time to strap in, and ultimately that had caused more harm. Blood from his forehead was on the instrument panel.

'KITT,' Michael said into his comlink. 'What about Devon, and our little request for air support?'

When there was no answer, Michael bucked the limp form of Matthews out of the demolished helicopter and draped him over his shoulders for a quick run back to *Boca Culebra*.

'KITT?' he tried one more time.

'Michael,' responded the car. *'If you'll look above you, I think you'll see the paratroops you requested . . . although Mr Devon informs me that this in no way acknowledges the existence of a secret government experimental weapons dump. The soldiers are simply on a routine desert survival course and training dry-run.'*

'That sounds like General Maddux talking,' he said. 'And Devon, of course, took great pains to be sure that we are part of the cover-up, right?'

*'It was a pre-condition you agreed to in order to secure the military assistance,'* said KITT.

Michael nodded. Another after-the-fact contract of sorts, to keep everything neat and secret. He supposed he could live with it. 'Yeah, sure,' he said. 'I guess I did agree to that, didn't I?'

Above him in the sky, the mushroom-blossoms of military parachutes began to blot out the desert blue.

## Chapter 14

When Michael returned to the Miramar hotel he saw the Foundation limousine in the parking lot which meant that Devon Miles had arrived on the scene.

The wrap-up to the whole *Boca Culebra* affair had been a bit peculiar.

As Michael had come over the ridge, lugging Matthews' unconscious body, he had been confronted by the sight of David emerging from the underbrush, carrying Eduardo O'Brien in a similar fashion. At first, he had thought it was a reflection; their timing had been that perfect. Between them, near the wrecked truck, Joanna waited with Temple's enormous Magnum in her grasp. She had watched while Michael and David dumped their respective loads into the dirt at her feet.

'Matthews is knocked out,' said Michael. The admission would have been unnecessary, except for what followed it.

'He's dead,' David said, of O'Brien. 'Died while I carried him back. He gave a snort and then stopped breathing. I almost wish I'd killed him in the fight.' He turned, and Joanna took his face in her hands again. 'And, in a way, I did. I think he choked to death on his own blood, which seems a fitting way for Eduardo O'Brien to leave the world.'

'It doesn't matter,' Michael had put in quickly. 'We have Matthews – Matthews will blame everything on O'Brien, because he's now a convenient scapegoat. Prison wouldn't have agreed with O'Brien, and he would have busted out, to come after you both.'

'He's talking almost like we're a couple, an item, or something,' said Joanna. David wiped blood off her forehead.

'And, Joanna – Arthur's murder has been avenged, don't you think?'

She nodded solemnly. 'It's not like what I thought it would feel like, you know? Like all those eye-for-an-eye vigilante movies? I don't feel happy, I feel kind of . . . ill. Relieved, but sickened at the whole thing. I just want to get away from here.' Her arm moved around David's waist. 'And back to some kind of normal life.'

'It's funny,' said David, 'but in the end, taking O'Brien alive didn't matter to me. Getting him fair and square didn't matter, either. All that was important was *getting him*. So why do I

feel bad now?’

‘Don’t,’ said Michael. ‘Think of what he did to Tiara; what he would have done to Joanna, to you. Think of all the deaths he’s ordered, like Arthur’s, and all the others he’s participated in himself. It’s impossible for me to find any compassion for a man like that.’

Joanna, who was stolidly unwilling to endure any more glumness, took David’s arm – the uninjured one – in one hand, and Michael’s in the other. ‘Consider this,’ she said with enthusiasm. ‘Dinner. Tonight. With champagne. My treat. Anywhere in LA you guys say. Takers?’

‘I don’t drink champagne,’ said David.

‘Ah, but this is a special occasion.’ She winked at Michael and kissed David on the cheek. David looked more than a little surprised.

‘Amazing, isn’t it, what buying a lady a bouquet of flowers will do?’ said David.

‘You mean stealing a bouquet – which is somehow more your style. Actually, I’m just making this offer to see if Michael will show up with a date other than his talking car.’

*‘I heard that remark,’* came KITT’s voice, tiny over the comlink speaker. *‘Michael, I’ve just had a transmission from Mr Devon, who requests you meet him for a debriefing at Ms St John’s hotel promptly.’*

‘I’ve got to meet this Devon guy,’ said David.

‘Careful,’ said Michael. ‘He might hire you.’

Behind them, paratroops were leading Matthews’ strike force out of the *Boca Culebra* tunnel at gunpoint. Without Matthews to give orders, there had been very little organised resistance. Matthews himself was still in dreamland. And Eduardo O’Brien, the golden man, lay tarnished in the dust, dead.

Devon Miles stood up and smoothed the knife-sharp creases in his three-piece suit in businessman’s grey. The shade complemented his backswept silver hair, and the direct darker grey of his eyes. In just over a year of dealing with the mercurial Michael Knight, Devon had found it to his advantage to maintain a paternal stance, as though he and the Foundation played father-image for one renegade child in particular. Of course, he had felt the same way about Bonnie Barstow, KITT’s old maintenance technician, before she and Michael had had the untimely inclination of falling in love. But that scenario had broken apart of its own accord – as Devon had predicted it would – and he had done his usual diplomatic job of smoothing over the cracks. Bureaucratic mop-up was a skill at which Devon had got very

good since taking over the Foundation shortly after the death of his mentor – and Michael's spiritual father – Wilton Knight.

The *Boca Culebra* business had been the first assignment to distract them all from the heartbreak of Bonnie Barstow's leavetaking, and during the time Michael was engaged in the mission, Devon had solved the conundrum of finding a replacement technician, someone as equally qualified as Bonnie. The substitute he had settled on was not without unique advantages.

Joanna St John had graciously allowed Devon the use of her suite, and Devon had ordered up coffee and tea. A bouquet of spring flowers brightened up the living room table, also courtesy of Devon – since knowing Michael, Devon had become much less the stolid scientist, socially proper but uninspired. Now he was – it was hard for Michael to find words – graceful. It was as though repeated contact with Michael's radically different personality had mellowed the older man, whom Michael had thought of on first sight to be a chemist of white magic, a keen-thinking researcher unfortunately doomed to the cliché of the absent-minded professor. Now he wasn't such a misanthrope . . . which led Michael to wonder what changes continued contact with Devon had worked on him, Michael Knight . . . or even KITT, who was programmed to evolve a personality based on Michael's own.

Devon loaded sugar into his coffee as though he was trying to corner the market on the white stuff.

'You don't know,' he began in his cultured, vaguely British tone, 'how much trouble it was to get General Maddux to send in the troops. Of course, if you had bothered to explain why, which you never do, it might have been easier, but I doubt it. None of your requests, Michael, embrace the concept of simplicity.'

'Come off it, Devon – Maddux was just teed off because we found out about his weapons playground out there in the middle of nowhere.' He pointed to Joanna and David. 'The death-dump that their tax money paid for, so people like Eduardo O'Brien could buy insider data and discover it, and people like Matthews could turn an illicit profit from it while killing innocent people. Not an ounce of good has come of Maddux's little pet programme.' He stopped to consider that the whole bizarre mission had brought David and Joanna together . . . well, maybe *that* was something, after all.

'KITT has sustained considerable wear and structural fatigue from your ill use of the equipment,' Devon continued, as though reading a dull book report. 'Mind you, I'm not de-emphasising the importance of purposefully abusing FLAG equipment to achieve the desired

goal...'

'Meaning, he's glad we got there on time,' Michael said to the others. 'Sometimes you have to translate what Devon says into English.'

Deadpan, Devon added 'Oh – did I mis-speak myself?' They all laughed politely. 'To continue: KITT requires a considerable amount of time in the diagnostic bay to bring him back up to optimum performance standard. Which brings us to the topic of the . . . ah, the new maintenance tech. By a sort of unspoken agreement, born of the personal feelings that had recently been trodden upon, Bonnie Barstow's name was not mentioned, though more out of respect for her than simple guilt.'

Somebody rapped curtly on the suite door.

Joanna answered it, admitting a blonde woman of her own height, clad in a grey Knight Industries coverall. Michael had just lifted his own cup of coffee.

She had a trim figure and a dazzling, billboard-perfect smile. Her eyes were deep-sea green, nearly the colour of the bottles in which vintage champagne is stored. Michael's first swallow of coffee nearly went down the wrong tube. The new tech looked very much like a negative-reversal image of the departed Bonnie – dark coverall, masses of blonde hair, the same inquisitive eyes.

He wondered if Devon selected his technicians from a pool of ex-Miss America contestants, then wondered further if Devon was becoming some kind of dirty old middle-aged man, what with the lookers he picked to service KITT and give Michael technical grief.

'Michael Knight, may I present Miss April Curtis?'

She smiled at him and shook his hand. The contact was electrical to Michael. Then she did something even more startling – she gave the dour Devon a friendly hug, and a kiss on the cheek. 'Hi.'

Michael could not take his eyes off her. Perhaps she would consent to be the fourth for Joanna's proposed celebration, since Michael still needed a date. But he couldn't see how bringing in this woman solved the problem that had begun with Bonnie Barstow's appointment to the same position. He cut Devon away from the group.

'Uh, Devon,' he said, *sotto voce*, 'Can I have a word with you . . . in private?'

'Certainly. Together they moved into the suite's bedroom and closed the door while Joanna poured April a cup of herbal tea and introductions were made all around.

'Devon,' Michael said once they were alone, 'That woman out there is . . . um, well, gorgeous.'

Devon inclined his head, as though he was pondering the solution to a complex equation in his brain. 'Yes. She is, I suppose, isn't she?'

'You remember what happened with Bonnie?'

He nodded. 'Yes. Unfortunate. But life goes on; she is happy in her work. And you?'

'I'll live. But Devon . . . why somebody like April? Why not a World War II vet with a beer gut and a stubble on his chin who happens to be a whiz with machines?'

'Because April is eminently qualified. She had three university degrees *more* than Bonnie, experience with Knight Industries prototypes, mechanical know-how. Lacking Bonnie, the best replacement we could hope for is April.'

'But Devon,' he said again, 'she also has a fantastic body, lovely hair and a killer smile. What's to prevent the same damned thing from happening all over again?'

Devon made a face and looked at Michael directly. 'You certainly have a high opinion of yourself. But then, KITT advises me that your attitude with most women is similar. The conquering hero, and all that. I chose April for the post with some reluctance. But I did take into consideration your capacity for womanizing, and chose April at great personal sacrifice, precisely *because* KITT's analysis tells me she is the one woman with whom you are *least* likely to get romantically involved.'

'I don't see how,' Michael said, shrugging broadly. 'Blast KITT, anyway.' Into his comlink, he said, 'What're you doing butting into my love life, motor mouth?'

There was no response.

'Perhaps you'll see the logic involved if you have KITT roll up April Curtis' Knight Industries dossier for you.'

Michael caught on at last. 'You're playing games, Devon – what is it you haven't told me?'

Devon just smiled enigmatically at some internal jest.

Michael keyed the comlink again. 'KITT, have you got April Curtis' dossier?'

'*On standby*,' KITT broadcast.

'Ask KITT what her maiden name was,' suggested Devon.

'*To answer that question quickly, Michael*,' said KITT, '*My data fetch lists April's maiden name as April Miles.*'

'Apr – !' Michael's jaw dropped open. 'She's related to you?!'

'*No, Michael*,' said KITT. '*She's related to Mr Devon Miles.*'

'That's my little girl out there,' said Devon proudly.

Michael exchanged speechlessness for simple horror. 'You mean – you mean you're her –'

he gulped. 'Her *daddy*? Devon, I never knew you were anybody's daddy. That's not in any of the dossiers!'

'That sort of personal information wouldn't do for a dossier any Knight Industries employee with the proper clearance can call up on a computer terminal.' He folded his arms indicating that rank did have its privileges.

Michael shook his head. 'Her *father*.'

'She was married to a man named Michael Curtis, Devon continued. 'Hm – another Michael. They seem to be bad luck for her. At any rate, they were divorced recently. She has already had her heart broken, Michael, so I suggest that – '

'Oh, I get the picture, all right,' Michael said guardedly. 'You replaced Bonnie with your own daughter to ensure that the team wouldn't get broken up by romance again.'

Devon smiled to himself.

'Then, on the other hand,' Michael said with a glint in his eye. 'You're taking a big risk, but maybe you've come to fancy the idea of having me as your son-in-law. Could that be it?'

This time the horror was Devon's. He blanched at the suggestion.

'An interesting proposition,' Michael said professorially. 'Should I risk the paternal wrath of Devon Miles in my ceaseless pursuit of love, or should I – '

'Please, enough!' Devon's hands went to his ears. 'I suggest this is all academic; choices, of course, lie with April herself, not with me.'

'Oh, *sure*.'

Slyly, he keyed the comlink back on. 'KIT, keep that April Curtis dossier on tap. I'm going to need it.'

'*Will do, Michael*.'

'What are the chances of her accepting a dinner invitation from me, if Devon has already told her about me?'

'*Abysmal, Michael*.'

'Thanks lot, old buddy.' He linked arms with Devon. 'Come on, let's go back out there, rejoin the party, and find out for ourselves.'

Devon, with the mien of a man who has a great burden to bear, allowed himself to be escorted out.

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